



RETHINKING  
**Afro  
Cuba**

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# CONTENTS

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<i>Preface</i>	v
INTRODUCTION	1
1. ABOLITIONISM AND THE FIGHT FOR INDEPENDENCE	5
2. AFRO-CUBAN AGENCY DURING SLAVERY	11
3. ANTONIO MACEO	15
4. JOSÉ MARTÍ AND JUAN GUALBERTO GÓMEZ	21
5. UNITED STATES NEOCOLONIALISM	25
6. FERNANDO ORTIZ	29
7. AFRO-CUBAN AGENCY DURING THE REPUBLIC	35
8. GERARDO MACHADO	39
9. FULGENCIO BATISTA	45
10. STRUGGLE FOR NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY	49
11. ESTABLISHING THE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES OF THE REVOLUTION	53
12. SOCIALIST TRANSFORMATION VIA MORAL INCENTIVES	57
13. SPECIAL PERIOD EXPERIMENTATION VIA MATERIAL INCENTIVES	65
14. AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE CUBAN REVOLUTION	71
15. SUMMATION	81
<i>Notes</i>	83
<i>Photo Credits</i>	87
<i>Bibliography</i>	89

## 6. FERNANDO ORTIZ

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The twentieth century demanded a theory rooted in social science research to anchor the mestizo nature of Cuban identity in the systematic study of the empirical reality of Cuba. Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969) emerged as the anthropologist to provide such a theory, transculturation:

The bulk of his contributions to Cuba’s intellectual life and public culture stemmed from his seminal research on all aspects of Cuba’s African-influenced, orally transmitted traditions. He validated the use of Afro-Cuban as an analytical construct while insisting that Afro-Cuban cultural forms were integral to a unified Cuban national identity. He also addressed the problem of racism and the workings of race as a social rather than biological category.<sup>33</sup>

Ortiz made a journey from being hostile to Black culture to being an advocate of tolerance and multicultural understanding:

I am of the opinion that the word transculturation better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another. . . . In the end, as the school of Malinowski’s followers maintain, the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them.<sup>34</sup>

The central concept of transculturation is a model of five stages, which according to Ortiz describes Cuba as being through stage four, but not yet five: hostility, compromise, adjustment, self-assertion, and integration. He was the scholar-activist who took the ideological orientation of José Martí and brought it into social science. The first and main ideological intervention was the argument that “racial differences” were myth and had to be replaced by differences in cultural heritage. Moore states, “Ortiz began to question the validity of racial constructs and to propose that Cubans define themselves in terms of

shared cultural heritage rather than shared ancestry.”<sup>35</sup> Change was therefore possible and his theoretical model attempted to map this change.

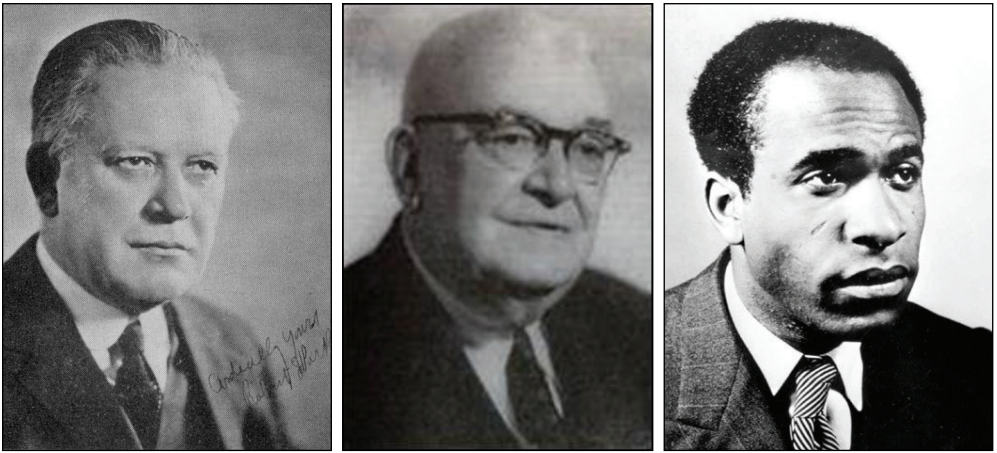
It is interesting to compare the thinking of Ortiz with an earlier sociologist, Robert Park, and a later psychologist, Frantz Fanon, as in the table below. All three models have a teleological thrust as they have predetermined ends. Park, a sociologist, worked with Booker T. Washington, and then as a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, where he developed his “race relations cycle.” As a liberal in the U.S. (he also served on the board of the Chicago Urban League) he theorized reform based on his version of Anglo-conformity. He wrote after the first Great Migration of African Americans to Chicago, and theorized that the desires of the Black middle class would prevail, and as such he posited yet another framework guiding the reforms of the civil rights movement. Fanon, a psychologist, wrote as a theorist in the Algerian war for national liberation. Hence he advanced a framework for revolutionary transformation in which the oppressed fought to overthrow the oppressive system after stages of embrace (assimilation) and rejection (nationalism). Park wrote in the context of western colonial dominance (ending in “assimilation”) while Fanon wrote in the context of the African revolution for national sovereignty (ending in “revolution”).

<b>Robert Park (1926)</b>	<b>Fernando Ortiz (1942)</b>	<b>Frantz Fanon (1959)</b>
Contact	Hostility	Contact
Competition	Compromise	---
Accomodation	Adjustment	---
Assimilation	--	Assimilation
---	Self-Assertion	Nationalism
---	Integration	Revolution

***Comparing the models of Park, Ortiz, and Fanon.***

Ortiz, an anthropologist, wrote within the U.S. neocolonial domination of Cuba and faced the legacy of Cuban racist slavery, with its relative degrees of freedom covered over by the racist segregationist

practices imported by the Yankee rulers and their “one drop rule.” He began his career as a racist criminologist, following the school of the Italian social-darwinist Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), who advanced



**Robert E. Park, Fernando Ortiz, and Frantz Fanon.**

a biological theory of crime that targeted Black people as slow witted and criminally inclined. However, Ortiz was active in progressive politics and also interacted with a wide variety of Black people in his research, going deeply inside the Afro-Cuban community. Black people turned him around and he became an advocate of Afro-Cuban humanity.

The one Cuba thesis of Martí was ideological and the political goal for revolutionary transformation, just as the integration phase of the Otiz model has never been fully realized in everyday life, though it has repeatedly been affirmed in the official documents since the founding of the republic. Ortiz campaigned for the full embrace of the African influences in Cuban culture and the recognition of the many forms of Afro-Cuba organizations. So in the end Ortiz makes an insightful critique of how the Cuban authorities attacked Black self-organization, alleging that this damaged the national unity of Cuba, that in the end all they did was drive these Black organizational forms underground and polarize rather than embrace. This is how Ortiz puts it as early as 1921:

The government persists in attacking the external and antiquated forms and does not take care to note the persistence of the internal essence. Thus disappeared the *Cabildo*, together with all of its positive features: mutual aid the insurance against illness, the bases, in short, of a traditional and rigorous mutuality. . . . How much better would it be if we today had mutualist *cabildos* and public dances with African drums and not temples of *brujeria*, of clandestine or openly tolerated nature.<sup>36</sup>

The main contribution of Ortiz was to provide a rational theoretical framework for grasping the deep contradictions in Cuban society between the two external influences of Cuban heritage—Spain and Africa.