
From Ybor City With Amor:

The Afro-Cubans of Tampa

An interview with award-winning scholar Susan D. Greenbaum,
author of *More Than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa*

by Danilo H. Figueredo

Like Professor Henry Higgins, Professor Susan D. Greenbaum violated the law of scholarly detachment and fell in love with her subject. The object of her affection, though, was not a person but a group of a people...and an institution. The people were Afro-Cubans from Tampa and the institution was the Martí-Maceo Society, a mutual aid organization founded in the late nineteenth century.

Greenbaum became involved with the organization when she helped the members apply for historic landmark designation at a time when it seemed businessmen in Ybor City, Tampa, in the name of gentrification, were eager to demolish the group's headquarters. As part of the effort to prove the veracity of the members' claim that Martí-Maceo had played a crucial role in the history of Tampa and Florida, Dr. Greenbaum researched the society's papers, interviewed its members, and wrote a pamphlet chronicling the Martí-Maceo era.

The exercise further prompted her to pen a comprehensive book about the society, not from the view of an anthropologist, which is her field of study, but through the eyes of a neutral narrator who nonetheless saw herself as a member of the society. Her decision paid off: The result was both a moving chronicle that renders loving tribute to the people of Ybor City and a scholarly achievement that earned her the prestigious 2003 Theodore Saloutos Award for the best book of the year in the area of immigration studies.

Greenbaum describes herself as white/Jewish/Midwestern. She attended the University of Kansas, where she earned a B.A. in sociology and an M.A. and a Ph.D. in anthropology. She has worked with Native Americans of the Miami Tribe in South Dakota, written social histories of Kansas, and researched the participation of African-American soldiers in the Spanish-American War. *More Than Black: Afro-Cubans in Tampa* was published by the University Press of Florida in 2002.

While I was growing up in Cuba, and later on in the United States, I often heard Cubans patting themselves on the back for the lack of racial conflict on the island. "Look at our history," they would say. "Our liberators were Antonio Maceo, a black general, and José Martí, a white poet-politician." They further asserted that black and white Cubans worked side by side in the building of the republic after 1902. Was this a myth? Or was it an expression of the complexities of the racial

divide on the island?

I am very familiar with this line of thinking. Alejandro de la Fuente's book *A Nation for All* (UNC Press 2001), presents a lucid analysis of the ideological roots of this peculiar affliction of logic. When Cubans speak of racial harmony in the early years of the twentieth century, when the Republic came into existence, they either forget or never learned about the extreme racial violence that took place in 1912, or the largely racial uprising of veterans in 1906, or the episodes of lynching that took place in Cuba under the banner of stamping out African *brujeria*—witchcraft.

Cuba was a slave economy. Racism inheres in such arrangements, and theories of African inferiority took hold in Cuba long before the Platt Amendment. José Martí preached equality, but counseled against talking about it too much. He felt that revisiting old grievances would expose old hatreds and hence threaten solidarity in the ranks. Better to ignore it and move on.

One of the most famous pieces of art done in Cuba is a portrait of a Cuban farmer, painted by artist Armando Menocal during the first half of the twentieth century. It is a realistic painting of a young man standing in an open field. He is handsome and he is white, probably of Spanish descent. This painting was meant to represent the average Cuban farmer. During the 1960s, the revolutionary government promoted the image of another Cuban farmer as representative of what it was to be Cuban. His name was Liborio and he too was white. This assumption of the typical Cuban farmer as white contradicts your research. You suggest that Cuban society chose to promote European-Cuban heritage rather than African-Cuban. Can you talk a bit about that?

Cubans of all colors have had a long-standing ambivalence about Africa. Most Cubans acknowledge and even celebrate African contributions to music and art that lend the culture its distinctive character. Independence from Spain is entwined with these traditions of cultural blending and religious syncretism, a patriotic sensibility that encourages inclusion and appreciation. At the same time, a strong subtext of European superiority and valorization of whiteness subordinates African influences and relegates them to certain stereotypic realms, like music. The public face of Cubans, certainly of those in

the United States, is almost always white. Raising the issue of racial inequality invariably produces discomfort and frequently outright denial. Silence and invisibility ease this contradiction.

The treatment of the Martí-Maceo Society in Tampa newspapers, including historical immigrant presses, offers a good example. The mainstream press, from 1900 to the present, has rarely mentioned them at all. Feature stories about mutual aid societies routinely list only white clubs. Journalistic discretion, not lack of information, explains the omission. Late in my research for the book, the University of South Florida library discovered a cache of microfilmed newspapers from Ybor City covering the period from before the turn of the century until the 1940s. I waded in with great enthusiasm. At last, I thought, I will get some contemporary accounts of the society and its leaders. My first excursion was the period immediately surrounding the opening of their building in 1909. I searched in vain for any mention of it. There was a regular weekly column about the societies and their activities, but Martí-Maceo was not included.

The Great Liberator, José Martí, knew that there was a divide between black and white Cubans and that many white Cubans discriminated against those who were not of European descent. He was one of the few revolutionaries in nineteenth-century Latin America to acknowledge racial conflict and to advocate equality and integration. The title of your book, *More Than Black*, refers to a comment Martí made about Cuban blacks and whites working together. Can you tell us how he made the comment and what Cubans thought of Martí's advocacy of racial harmony? Can you recount why Martí came to Tampa to get the financial support of the Cuban community that lived there during the 1890s?

More than Black comes from a clause within the phrase, "A Cuban is more than white, more than mulatto, and more than black." It means that Cuban identity supercedes race. Martí made this assertion in an essay entitled "Mi Raza" that was written in 1893, two years before his death. This era also coincided with the rampant rise of Social Darwinism, the pseudo-scientific justification for racism and colonial domination. In repudiating this racial doctrine, Martí was lonely among scholars and political activists of this period; even among the Abolitionists, nearly all of whom believed in fundamental differences between black and white humans. Martí rejected this essentialist argument and correctly attributed differences in skin color to trivial effects of latitude. (It is important to note, however, that he confidently believed Europe was culturally superior to Africa.) He wrote his essay in an effort to convince his compatriots to reject racism and find solidarity in their shared Cuban identity. If they had agreed with him already, he would not have needed to write it.

The polite, but nonetheless racist, disdain that most white Cubans held for black Cubans was also present among the cigar workers of Tampa. Martí did have a tremendous influence on that community, however. He made more than a dozen trips to Tampa between 1891 and 1895. Tampa and

Key West (also a Cuban cigar-making settlement at that time) had the largest populations of exiled Cubans in the United States and the most politicized. The cigar-makers raised many thousands of dollars for the independence cause and were the single most important source of revenue. They idolized Martí. He made a point of including Afro-Cubans in his social and political circle in Tampa. Race relations in the Tampa Cuban community of that brief period were extremely cordial, perhaps uniquely so. It was a transitory condition, however.

One direct result of Martí's influence in Tampa was the creation of the Martí-Maceo Society. Yet I believe very little is known about this institution, which is what makes your work so crucial to Cuban history and the history of Cuban immigration to the United States. Could you tell us about the society and the how it brought together Cubans of all races? How long did this Afro-Cuban and Euro-Cuban partnership last? How did those outside the Latino community react to this society?

The end of the War for Independence, which was hijacked by the United States and renamed the Spanish-American War, also brought the end of Cuban racial solidarity in Tampa. Cuba's ruined economy sent cigar-makers back to factories in the United States, especially to Tampa. Former political exiles became economic exiles. Ybor City hosted Spanish and Sicilian immigrants in addition to the Cubans. Both of these other groups had established nationality-based mutual aid societies in the 1890s. With the dissolution of their revolutionary clubs, the Cubans established their own mutual aid society in 1899. At the beginning, both black and white Cubans belonged, and one of the officers was an Afro-Cuban. This was an era in the South when racial integration was becoming outlawed in virtually every aspect of public and private life. The club split along racial lines after less than a year. The black members were asked to leave. Somewhat ruefully, especially since the whites kept the building and other assets, they started their own club. It was named for Martí and Antonio Maceo, the famous mulatto general. The symbolism of naming their organization after the most potent icons of Cuban racial solidarity seems blatantly accusatory. Although logical, I could never find any corroboration that this name was intended as a poke at the white Cubans, who betrayed these martyred heroes so soon after both had died.

It is easy to criticize the white Cubans for being cowardly, or secretly racist all along, but the period in which the club fractured was one of escalating racial violence [throughout the South]. One elderly descendant of a white Cuban leader in the original club told me that there were threats against their families. An account of the meeting where the split occurred, written by José Muñiz, a contemporary, indicated that the split was amicable. My narrators, including one whose father was among those asked to leave, told me that the Afro-Cubans did not feel too amicable about it, but they acquiesced and did not complain publicly, for their own safety in relation to the Klan, and for their future social comfort in the Ybor City community.

The Martí-Maceo Society spans three centuries since its foundation in the 1890s to today. In your chronicle, you list a series of memorable characters that would be at home in a García Márquez novel. I'm thinking about Sra. Paulina Pedroso, who was ready to give up her life and livelihood to protect José Martí; the supposedly honorable Cuban who embezzled the organization's funds; and the merchant who came to the society's rescue.

Paulina is the only Afro-Cuban patriot from Tampa who is well known to the public here. She and her husband, Ruperto, were strong supporters of Martí. They owned a boarding house across the street from the Ybor cigar factory. Martí always stayed there during his visits to Tampa. Their relationship became a metaphor for the message Martí was sending the cigar-makers about race. As a metaphor, it contains interesting elements. The Pedrosos were very humble, uneducated people, even though they had succeeded in buying property and a business. Paulina's image is maternal; Ruperto is described as doggedly loyal. They are the reassuring symbols of blackness that Martí himself wanted to emphasize. In addition, I discovered a large group of black writers and intellectuals in Ybor City, associates of Rafael Serra, Juan Gualberto Gómez, and Morúa Delgado, who were also closely allied with Martí. This group has been completely omitted from accounts of local Independence activities.

The Pedrosos continued to be an important part of the Afro-Cuban community until about 1910, when they returned to Havana. Paulina died a few years later and was given a grand funeral in Havana, which many from Tampa traveled to attend. Descendants of Ruperto's brothers still live in Tampa and belong to the Martí-Maceo. Teófilo Domínguez, the leading writer in the group mentioned earlier, also has descendants still living in Tampa. Strikingly handsome, with a strong progressive voice, he was a central founder of the Martí-Maceo society, which he envisioned as an extension of the social revolution they had attempted to instill in Cuba. He tragically contracted tuberculosis and died in 1902, while still in his early thirties.

The embezzler you refer to was Bruno Roig, who owned a store in Ybor City and also had been active in Independence organizations. On the surface, he was extremely respectable—a successful businessman, civic leader, confidant of Martí. Out of view, however, he was fond of gambling. He was treasurer of the Martí-Maceo until 1915, when it was discovered that he lost the club's funds in a wager. The loss was discovered because the final payment on the mortgage came due. They would have been wiped out, but a Jewish merchant in Ybor City came to their rescue. He helped them arrange a new mortgage and transfer Bruno's remaining assets to the club. Bruno returned to Cuba, broke and disgraced. The club survived, however, and Bruno became a sort of anti-hero, a bad example used to remind officers about their responsibilities and the shame attached to failing in them.

Recalling colorful and unique characters, the Martí-Maceo

Society had two different types of dealings with two very different historical figures from modern Cuba. You report that dictator Fulgencio Batista supported the society, sending money from Cuba. Then, you narrate a visit to the society by a young Fidel Castro, who was plotting against Batista. It would be interesting to talk about these two men and the impression they made on the members of the society.

Within the Martí-Maceo society, the politics of the 1959 revolution were complicated. There were strong supporters of both Batista and Castro among the members, and both individuals attempted to woo this group. Batista had more to offer at the time. In the 1940s, while Grau San Martín was still president, Batista arranged a gift of several thousand dollars from the Cuban government to Martí-Maceo. This was the first time any Cuban official had made good on a promise to them, and it won Batista a lot of gratitude. He made another sizeable contribution to them in the mid-1950s.

In 1955, Castro made a trip to Tampa in an effort to mobilize support among what was left of the cigar workers. He sought permission to use the Martí-Maceo hall for a speech after the white Cuban club had turned him down. The president of Martí-Maceo refused his request also, for similar reasons. Both clubs had explicit clauses in their by-laws against supporting political candidates or causes. Castro reportedly got very angry at the refusal and spoke abusively to Martí-Maceo's president.

This incident cost him support among the undecided, and many regarded him as an arrogant Spaniard who was probably a racist. Batista, on the other hand, was not quite white. Although Batista's corrupt despotism was not contested by anyone in the club, many Afro-Cubans could identify with him more easily than with Castro. This racial subtext, especially as it played out in Tampa, encouraged many Afro-Cubans to withhold support for Castro in spite of ideological agreement with his program for social justice. After the revolution, there was a greater level of support for Castro, and Batista was of course no longer relevant. In early 1959, the club passed two resolutions: one supporting the land reform measures and the other to send a cash donation to the new government. However, the arrival of large numbers of exiles in Tampa, most of whom were fierce enemies of the new regime, discouraged public support for Castro.

Aside from being a fascinating history of this Cuban organization, the city of Tampa, and Cuban immigration to Florida, your book is also an illustration of the many layers there are to diversity. For example, Cuban blacks didn't want to associate with American blacks, at least initially. On the other hand, American blacks were uncomfortable with Cuban blacks. Yet both were oppressed by bigoted Floridians during the first half of the twentieth century. Equally complex is your involvement with the society: a non-Cuban, white scholar who becomes the chronicler of Afro-Cubans from Tampa.

From the outset of the research, I knew that relationships

with other groups would be important to understand. But these interrelationships were far more complicated than I was expecting. The cigar enclave included three main nationalities (Cubans, Spaniards, and Italians) and various smaller national/ethnic groups. Many merchants in the enclave were Jewish, as were some white-collar employees in the factories. Small numbers of West Indians were also on the scene, some connected to cigars and other involved with dock work. Inside Ybor City there was a discernible class hierarchy that lined up with color and national identity. Afro-Cubans were at the very bottom, except in comparison to African Americans, with whom they were grouped legally on the basis of color. The African-American population, which was as large as all the Ybor City groups combined, also reflected a class hierarchy. Off to the side, but inevitably on top, were the native-born whites. Afro-Cubans had virtually no contact with the latter but negotiated complex relationships with all the other groups.

Relationships with African Americans were strong at the beginning, interrupted by a generation of insularity, and then strong once again after World War II, when the majority of marriages involving black Cubans were with black Americans. Relations inside the immigrant enclave also ebbed and flowed, but as long as the factories operated, Afro-Cubans strongly identified with the larger community of immigrants, with whom they shared language, culture, and circumstance. These crosscutting ties were as significant as the barriers in defining Afro-Cuban identity. Their club was very small in size, making them more vulnerable. Color further jeopardized their actions. They needed allies. This context provided a fascinating scenario of ethnicity in action. The ideology of the cigar workers was also important in defining relations, both inside and without. Socialist influences helped build bridges more easily between black and white immigrants, but interesting racial contradictions also emerged.

By delving into the details of Ybor City and Tampa's ethnic past, I learned how contingent is the process of identity formation, and hence difficult to theorize. This was a unique context. They all are. Nonetheless, I do think general lessons are suggested. There is a school of thought in black immigrant research that stresses adaptive isolation and deliberate cultural obstacles that avoid merging with the African-American community. Black immigrants enjoy higher status than native-born blacks and actively seek to preserve it. There is some of that lore of cultural superiority among Tampa's Afro-Cubans, and there are remaining issues that divide. However, there also has been much collaboration and bilateral benefit, spanning a very long period. It is important to emphasize this constructive alliance, because there is a tendency in this literature to regard ties to the African-American community as negative. This practice is an extension of the so-called "pejorative tradition" in scholarship about African Americans, an implicit unquestioned assumption that their culture is deficient and pathological. The African Americans in the story I told are no more pathological than anyone else and just as varied. Products of their culture, their institutions, aided Afro-Cuban

entry into higher education and vocations other than cigar-making when the industry collapsed in the 1930s. For this perspective, I recommend Evelio Grillo's *Black Cuban/Black American* (Arte Público Press 2000). He offers a fascinating account of this experience.

My own ties to these communities, especially to the members of Martí-Maceo, are another layer, as you suggest. I spent many years working with them in various capacities, and I formed many personal relationships. The final chapter in my book is essentially autobiographical. It presents the developments of the 1980s and '90s, a whole generation, from my viewpoint as a witness and participant. I got a card the other day from a woman whose grandfather was a close friend; she was 4 years old when I first met her, and now she is nearly 30.

The reasons for this long period of research, or more accurately the long time it took to complete the book, are varied. Mainly, however, my involvement with the club became a commitment I willingly maintained, because I much enjoyed the company of the people I got to know there. These ties could raise questions about bias. I was officially excused from pressures to lie about their history. We were constructing a record, documenting their historical role in the Ybor City community, an enterprise we knew would be contested. I do not mean to suggest that this is an "objectively true" account; all ethnographies are in some way biased by their authors. I do believe, however, that longevity allowed me to understand this community better than a shorter term of research, and that was simply a benefit. I always limited my role to providing assistance that was sought, not making suggestions or trying to impose my ideas. That way, I could stay aloof from factions and not get personally invested in outcomes. At one point, during a crisis, I agreed to a more proactive role, which turned out to be a good lesson in why one should follow the rules of fieldwork relations. My own ethnicity was both a problem and an asset, I think. My cultural unfamiliarity helped balance relations in some respects; I was the student and they the tutors. I think they enjoyed my klutziness on the dance floor; it humanized the *profesora*. The Jewish part, which is actually by marriage, helped associate me with progressive ties that many had to labor and politics in New York and offered me essentially friendly relations with Jewish merchants in Ybor City.

Like most Cubans everywhere, members of Martí-Maceo were warm, hospitable, and cosmopolitan. I grew comfortable in my role as their friend at the university, the liberal white lady who could call people downtown. I still do that when I am asked. At this point, however, the leaders in the Martí-Maceo are fully capable of doing their own calling.



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