

“Todos los negros y todos los blancos y todos tomamos café”:  
Race and the Cuban Revolution  
in Nicolás Guillén Landrián’s  
*Coffea arábica*

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In 1968, Nicolás Guillén Landrián—Afro-Cuban filmmaker and nephew of famed poet Nicolás Guillén—was commissioned by the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC)<sup>1</sup> to make a documentary on the Cordón de La Habana (Havana Greenbelt), an ambitious agricultural campaign by the Cuban Revolution to plant fruit trees, coffee, and peas in the peripheral zones of Havana.<sup>2</sup> The resulting twenty-minute short film, *Coffea arábica*, would face immediate censorship and would contribute to the filmmaker’s branding as a political dissident and eventual expulsion from ICAIC in 1971. Although this backlash is generally attributed to *Coffea arábica*’s irreverent pairing of images of Fidel Castro with the Beatles’ song “The Fool on the Hill,” as well as to the fact that the Cordón de la Habana ended in failure, I maintain that Guillén Landrián’s

1 Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos.

2 Joseph L. Scarpaci, Roberto Segre, and Mario Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 140.

critique cuts much deeper, arguing that the racial hierarchies of Cuba's colonial legacy are perpetuated within the Revolution's agricultural policies.

Guillén Landrián's understudied *Coffea arábica* is especially significant because its critique appeared during the early years of Cuba's Soviet period (1961–91), which produced a general textual silence on post-1959 racial inequalities.<sup>3</sup> While ample symposia, conferences, and artistic works on this subject were created in the Castro government's first three years, in April 1961, the day before the Bay of Pigs invasion, Castro publicly declared the socialist nature of the Revolution. As early as 1962, official discourse held that the colorblind economic and social reforms made in its first three years served to fully eliminate systemic racial inequalities in Communist Cuba.<sup>4</sup>

Scholarship, public activism, and artistic production that countered this position were henceforth systematically discouraged, censored, and repressed.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, prior to the capitalist reforms and dollarization of the economy in the 1990s, the limited scholarly writings published on this subject were generally authored by writers living abroad.<sup>6</sup> The harshest condemnations of the Castro government's position on race came from black militants who spent brief periods in Cuba and wrote about their experiences upon leaving.<sup>7</sup> However, most scholarship on racial inequality produced abroad during this period fell somewhere between an outright rejection and a total embrace of the Castro government's rhetoric, recognizing how reforms benefited black Cubans but also acknowledging to various degrees the persistence

3 Although diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union began in 1960, it was not until December 1961 that Castro declared that Cuba would adopt communism, cementing a relationship with the Soviets that would steadily increase throughout the 1960s. Cuban-Soviet relations continued until 1991, when Soviet subsidies to the island ended a few months before the Soviet Union's dissolution. See Jacqueline Loss and José Manuel Prieto González, eds., *Caviar with Rum: Cuba-USSR and the Post-Soviet Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

4 Strides were made early on in turning the tide of racial segregation. In 1959 Castro addressed the issue in numerous speeches and interviews, private beaches were made public, ending their de facto segregation, public parks were remodeled to encourage integration, and by 1960 formerly segregated private clubs were nationalized and open for public use. Notably, this campaign targeted black and white groups alike, and in September 1961 more than 170 black organizations were shut down under the auspices of further desegregation and incorporation into revolutionary society. Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 269–81.

5 Alberto Abreu, "El Black Power en la Cuba de los sesenta y setenta: Conversación con Juan Felipe Benemelis," *Afromodernidades*, September and October 2012, [afromodernidades.wordpress.com/?s=black+power](http://afromodernidades.wordpress.com/?s=black+power); Alberto Abreu, "Subalternidad: Debates teóricos y su representación en el campo cultural cubano postrevolucionario," *Argus-a* 3, no. 10 (2013): 1–47; de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*; Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption, and Resistance, 1959–1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Linda S. Howe, *Transgression and Conformity: Cuban Writers and Artists after the Revolution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 82; Silvia Cézár Miskulin, "Las ediciones El Puente y la nueva promoción de poetas cubanos," in Jesús J. Barquet, ed., *Ediciones El Puente en La Habana de los años 60: Lecturas críticas y libros de poesía* (Chihuahua, Mexico: Del Azar, 2011), 32; Carlos Moore, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988); and Mark Q. Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-revolutionary Cuba* (New York: Cambridge, 2006), 67.

6 While there has been much more scholarly and artistic production from within Cuba on the issue of racial inequality since the 1990s, this does not mean that the repression used to silence critiques of racism and discrimination has been eliminated in the post-Soviet period. In fact, as I will discuss briefly later in this essay, many of the same strategies of repression persist to this day.

7 Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (Waco, TX: Word, 1978), 107–9; John Clytus, *Black Man in Red Cuba* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1970); Skip Gates, "Cuban Experience: Eldridge Cleaver on Ice," interview, *Transition* 49 (1975); Moore, *Castro*. For scholarship on the subject of US black activists' relationship to Cuba, see Sawyer, *Racial Politics*; Sarah Seidman, "Tricontinental Routes of Solidarity: Stokely Carmichael in Cuba," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4, no. 2 (2012): 1–25; and Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

of inequalities.<sup>8</sup> One notable exception to this trend was Afro-Cuban historian Walterio Carbonell's *Crítica: Cómo surgió la cultura nacional (Critique: How the National Culture Emerged)*, published in Cuba in 1961 but censored until 2005, which critiqued the Castro government's colorblind discourse for reproducing the very nationalist rhetoric that had legitimized the continuation of white power in the early republic. Generally, however, domestic Cuban scholars tended toward silence on contemporary racial issues, focusing their efforts retrospectively on subjects like the heroic leadership of Afro-Cubans in the wars of independence, the country's history of plantation slavery, or the exploitation of black labor by US companies prior to their nationalization.<sup>9</sup>

Despite this general climate of repression and censorship, some Cuban writers and artists continued to produce texts that challenged this triumphalist position toward racial equality. One significant example is the emergence in the mid-1960s of a loosely affiliated group of young black intellectuals and artists, which has been characterized as a *negrista* movement by Lillian Guerra and as a Black Power movement by Juan Felipe Benemelis and which included Guillén Landrián, historian Walterio Carbonell, filmmaker Sara Gómez, playwright Eugenio Hernández, ethnographer Rogelio Martínez Furé, and poet Nancy Morejón, among others.<sup>10</sup> Members of this black intelligentsia would face various forms of censorship and persecution in the early Soviet period as they tried to call attention to ongoing racial inequalities within Cuba. In 1967, for example, members of this group prepared a statement on race in Cuba that they submitted for presentation at the 1968 World Cultural Congress, a meeting of intellectuals and artists on cultural issues facing the so-called third world. This cooperation among Afro-Cuban intellectuals and their comments on race were labeled by then minister of education José Llanusa Gobels as seditious, and the writers and artists involved were branded as troublemakers. Although their document is often referenced in accounts of Afro-Cubans' attempted participation in the 1968 World Cultural Congress, the contents contained therein are not detailed and remain unavailable.<sup>11</sup> Similar to scholarship from this period, works by these intellectuals that focused on pre-1959 race relations or that dealt with individual

8 De la Fuente's *A Nation for All* lays out succinctly the various positions of this scholarship. See David Booth, "Cuba, Color, and the Revolution," *Science and Society* 11, no. 2 (1976): 129–72; Lourdes Casal, "Race Relations in Contemporary Cuba," in Anani Dzidzienyo and Lourdes Casal, eds., *The Position of Blacks in Brazil and Cuban Society*, Report no. 7 (London: Minority Rights Group, 1979); Jorge Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1978); Jorge Domínguez, "Racial and Ethnic Relations in the Cuban Armed Forces: A Non-topic," *Armed Forces and Society* 2, no. 2 (1982): 19–70; Geoffrey E. Fox, "Race and Class in Contemporary Cuba," in Irving Louis Hervowitz, ed., *Cuban Communism*, 3rd ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1977): 421–44; Marianne Masferrer and Carmela Mesa-Lago, "The Gradual Integration of the Black in Cuba: Under the Colony, the Republic, and the Revolution," in Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Slavery and Race Relations in Latin America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974); and Leslie B. Rout Jr., *The African Experience in Spanish America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

9 De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 4.

10 Abreu, "Black Power"; and Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 256.

11 Abreu, "Black Power"; de la Fuente, *A Nation for All*, 302; Moore, *Castro*, 307–12; and Sawyer, *Racial Politics*, 66–67. Apparently because of her involvement in this document, poet Nancy Morejón was banned from publishing poetry from 1969 to 1979. Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 273–74.

prejudices and attitudes were more likely to be published, while those focused on discriminatory policies and systemic racial inequalities tended to be censored.<sup>12</sup>

Black Cuban intellectuals were not the only people to face repression and censorship during the Soviet period; indeed, artists and intellectuals perceived as veering from official positions or as representing any nonstate entity were systematically marginalized. However, Cuba's racial discourse represented a particularly sensitive subject, since Cuba's support of black liberation movements abroad formed an integral part of its foreign policy. In this sense, although Guillén Landrián's *Coffea arábica* is not the only text from the period to suggest that the Castro government's racial discourse may contribute to the continuation of racial inequalities, Guillén Landrián's critique of discrimination within its agricultural policies is unique and, in my view, profoundly important because of how it explicitly attempts to intervene into an international dialogue on civil rights in which the Castro government was engaged in the late 1960s. Guillén Landrián appropriates what I will call a tricontinentalist rhetoric and aesthetic, which the Castro government used to critique racism in places such as the United States and South Africa, to argue that the racial hierarchies of Cuba's colonial past continue within the Revolution's agricultural campaign. Through attempting to undermine the state's racial discourse at its very core, *Coffea arábica* opens a window into a counterposition and critique of racial inequality articulated from within Cuba during the first decade of its revolution.

### The Erasure and Revival of Nicolás Guillén Landrián

Until very recently, Guillén Landrián has been largely absent from Cuban film historiography. Michael Chanan's *The Cuban Image* (1985) and his later edition *Cuban Cinema* (2004), which are considered the disciplinary standard on Cuban film, discuss in detail both the released and unreleased work of Sara Gómez and Sergio Giral, the other black filmmakers at ICAIC in the 1960s. However, neither of these texts even mentions Guillén Landrián.<sup>13</sup> Prior to 2002, only four of the eighteen documentaries that he directed before the age of thirty-four were shown publicly, and six of his films have been completely lost.<sup>14</sup>

12 For example, Afro-Cuban filmmaker Sergio Giral had success in Cuba's film industry with a series of films dealing with the history of slavery and maroonage in Cuba. However, his 1981 film *Techo de vidrio* (*Glass Roof*), which dealt with contemporary themes of corruption and subtle forms of racism in employment practices, was not released for six years. Aviva Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution* (West Sussex: Blackwell, 2011), 118–19. Similarly, Afro-Cuban director Sara Gómez's films, which tended to treat issues facing black people and women within Cuban society at large while not directly critiquing the government or its policies, were generally well received. However, only one part of her 1968 trilogy about the Isle of Youth, which called attention to the overrepresentation of poor black Cubans in the Isle of Youth's detention centers and reform schools, was shown in limited release. Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 267–69.

13 Manuel Zayas, "Nicolás Guillén: Muerte y resurrección," *Blog de Manuel Zayas* (in Spanish), 14 April 2010, manuelzayas.wordpress.com/2010/04/14/nicolas-guillen-landrian-muerte-y-resurreccion/.

14 These films include *Homenaje a Picasso* (1962), *Congos reales* (1962), *Patio arenero* (1962), *El morro* (1963), *En un barrio viejo* (1963), *Un festival* (1963), *Ociel del Toa* (1965), *Los del baile* (1965), *Rita Montaner* (1965), *Retornar a Baracoa* (1966), *Reportaje* (1966), *Coffea arábica* (1968), *Expo Maquinaria Pabellón Cuba* (1969), *Desde la Habana, 1969* (1971), *Taller de Línea y 18* (1971), *Un reportaje sobre el Puerto Pesquero* (1972), *Nosotros en el Cuyaguaje* (1972), and *Para construir una casa* (1972). Six of these films—*Homenaje a Picasso*, *Congos reales*, *Patio arenero*, *El morro*, *Rita Montaner*, and *Expo Maquinaria Pabellón Cuba*—have been lost entirely. The only films exhibited publicly prior to 2002 are *En un barrio viejo* (Honorary Mention at the Krakow Film Festival), *Ociel del Toa* (First Prize at the Valladolid International Film Festival), *Coffea*



Nicolás Guillén Landrián, circa 1968.  
Courtesy of Manuel Zayas

Guillén Landrián claimed to have suffered decades of political persecution at the hands of the Cuban government before eventually moving to Miami in 1989, where, prior to his first exhibit at the Cuban Museum of Arts and Culture in 1990, he sold his extraordinary cubist paintings for very little and where he eventually made his final film, a portrait of downtown Miami called *Inside Downtown* (2001). After his death from pancreatic cancer in a Miami hospital in July 2003, his widow returned with him to Havana, burying him in the Colón Cemetery and resettling in an apartment filled with her late husband's paintings.<sup>15</sup>

Despite his status as one of Cuba's only black filmmakers and despite his relation to Cuba's Poet Laureate Nicolás Guillén, the censorship of Guillén Landrián's films has resulted in a dearth of scholarship on his work. However, with the loosening of restrictions in Cuba in recent years toward previously censored artists and intellectuals, this has begun to change dramatically. Several of his films were publicly screened in Cuba in 2002.<sup>16</sup> In 2003 Cuban director Manuel Zayas released a documentary on Guillén Landrián called *Café con leche* (*Coffee with Milk*). *Café con leche*, along with two other recent documentaries on Guillén Landrián, has been instrumental in the revival of the censored filmmaker's work both in Cuba and abroad.<sup>17</sup> In recent years Guillén Landrián's films have been shown in film festivals in Austria, Belgium, Japan, Mexico, Spain, and the United States, and through the efforts of director Victor Jiménez, many of Guillén Landrián's films are now available on YouTube. Within Cuba, Guillén Landrián now has a cult following among filmmakers, film critics, and scholars of Afro-Cuba, and his work is taught at Cuba's International Film and Television School. In spring

*arábiga*, and *Nosotros en el Cuyaguataje*. "Nicolásito Guillén," *inCUBAdora: Cuban Underground Guide*, in-cubadora.org/nicolásito-guillen (accessed 7 September 2014).

15 *Retornar a La Habana con Guillén Landrián*, dir. Raydel Araoz and Julio Ramos, 2012.

16 They were shown at the Muestra de Jóvenes Realizadores, an annual film festival funded by ICAIC for works by new Cuban filmmakers (or, in this case, filmmakers new to the Cuban public). Julio Ramos, "Cine, archivo, y poder: Entrevista a Manuel Zayas en Nueva York," in "Especial Nicolás Guillén Landrián," special issue, *La Fuga* (Spring 2013), www.lafuga.cl/cine-archivo-y-poder-entrevista-a-manuel-zayas-en-nueva-york/664.

17 *Retornar a La Habana*, dir. Araoz and Ramos; and *Nicolás: El fin pero no es el fin*, dir. Victor Jiménez and Jorge Egusquiza Zorrilla, Coincident Productions and Village Films, 2005.

2013 the Chilean journal of film criticism *La Fuga* devoted an entire issue to this long-elided director, publishing articles by film critics living in Cuba and abroad.<sup>18</sup>

Many of Guillén Landrián's films touch on subjects other than race, and the criticism that has emerged on his work generally focuses on his experimental aesthetics, the dialogue between his films and his poetry, and his divergence from ICAIC's propagandistic cinema through depicting a complex reality in which the Revolution's projects and goals remained unfinished and through delivering critiques of the government's official discourse surrounding labor and productivity.<sup>19</sup> Much less has been written on his treatment of race, and studies of films such as *En un barrio viejo* (*In an Old Neighborhood*), which ends with a Santería ceremony held under the watchful gaze of portraits of Fidel Castro and Camilo Cienfuegos, or *Los del baile* (*Those of the Dance*), which shows Afro-Cubans dancing and partying, have focused on these films' ironic commentary on the government's sober socialist discourse and pejorative attitude toward Afro-Cuban religions as well as on the films' attempt to bring Afro-Cuban identity and history into the center of the national imaginary.<sup>20</sup>

*Coffea arábica*'s critique is much farther-reaching in its implications, since, in my reading, it addresses the Revolution's perpetuation of racial inequalities through its agricultural policies. However, prior readings of *Coffea arábica* have overlooked the film's central argument.<sup>21</sup> Lillian Guerra, whose groundbreaking *Visions of Power in Cuba: Revolution, Redemption and Resistance, 1959–1971* has largely informed my understanding of the political climate in which Guillén Landrián made his films, suggests that *Coffea arábica* was intended not as a critique but as an “ode to Cuba's idealism” that was later misread following the failure of the Cordón de La Habana, such that “once innocuous scenes became subversive.”<sup>22</sup> As I will detail through my analysis, I do not view this film as innocuous in any sense but rather as a keen and unique commentary on racial inequality that speaks boldly into a moment in which this subject matter was repeatedly silenced. However, in order to explain the weight of Guillén Landrián's critique, it is first necessary to further outline the complex racial politics to which his film responds.

18 See [www.lafuga.cl/dossier/especial-nicolas-guillen-landrian/15](http://www.lafuga.cl/dossier/especial-nicolas-guillen-landrian/15).

19 Amelia Duarte and Ariadna Ruiz, “El collage de la nostalgia: Una mirada desde la colina; Rasgos postmodernos de la obra documental de Nicolás Guillén Landrián,” *Cine Cubano*, no. 20 (January–March 2011), [www.cubacine.cult.cu/sitios/revistacinecubano/digital20/articulo14.htm](http://www.cubacine.cult.cu/sitios/revistacinecubano/digital20/articulo14.htm); Lillian Guerra, *Visions of Power*; Julio Ramos, “Cine, cuerpo y trabajo: Los montajes de Guillén Landrián,” *La Gaceta de Cuba*, no. 3 (2011): 45–47; Dylon Robbins, “On the Margins of Reality: Fiction, Documentary, and Marginal Subjectivity in Three Early Cuban Revolutionary Films,” in Miriam Haddu and Joanna Page, eds., *Visual Synergies in Fiction and Documentary Film from Latin America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 27–48; and Ann-Marie Stock, *On Location in Cuba: Street-Filmmaking During Times of Transition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). In the special issue of *La Fuga*, see Ernesto Livon-Grosman, “Nicolásito's Way: Los sinuosos caminos de la estética revolucionaria”; Julio Ramos, “Los archivos de Guillén Landrián: Cine, poesía y disonancia”; Dean Luis Reyes, “Exhumaciones de Nicolás Guillén Landrián”; and Dylon Robbins, “Los del baile: Pueblo, producción, performance”; [www.lafuga.cl/dossier/especial-nicolas-guillen-landrian/15/](http://www.lafuga.cl/dossier/especial-nicolas-guillen-landrian/15/).

20 Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 342–43; Robbins, “Margins of Reality”; and Aisha Cort, “Negrometrage: Literature and Race in Revolutionary Cuba” (PhD diss., Emory University, 2010).

21 Cort, “Negrometrage”; Duarte and Ruiz, “Collage de la nostalgia”; Ramos, “Cine, cuerpo y trabajo”; and Livon-Grosman, “Nicolásito's Way.”

22 Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 347–48.

Sowing the Seeds for *Coffea arabica*: Racial Discourse in Revolutionary Cuba

Through narrative, media spectacle, film, and political propaganda, the Cuban Revolution has long presented itself as the culmination of the nation's history of black political activism or as the final realization of the struggle for black freedom begun by maroon communities during slavery and by the *mambí* soldiers in the wars for independence. According to this rhetoric, the Revolution revived José Martí's vision for a raceless *Cuba Libre*, finally ensuring the equality that was fostered in the independence wars and that, many have argued, was curtailed by US intervention—transforming the Cuban War of Independence into the Spanish-American War—and the subsequent influence of US racial policies on the island.<sup>23</sup>

In reality, the Castro government's racial discourse has generally been characterized as one of "inclusionary discrimination," which Mark Sawyer defines in *Racial Politics in Post-revolutionary Cuba* as a combination of Latin American exceptionalism, in which the seemingly inclusionary prerevolutionary concept of *mestizaje* is used to support a myth of racial democracy that veils inequalities, and Marxist exceptionalism, in which socialist reforms are purported to have eradicated racial inequities, thus eliminating any need for Afro-Cubans to organize politically or to struggle against racism. This discourse of inclusionary discrimination within Cuba has been at odds with the state's support of black liberation movements in the sphere of international politics.<sup>24</sup> Cuba's participation in decolonization efforts in the Congo and Angola and its granting of asylum to Black Power activists are often cited as evidence of the Castro government's outreach to black movements abroad. Another of the most recognized examples of Cuba's demonstrated solidarity with black freedom struggles occurred when, on a visit to New York for the United Nations General Assembly in September 1960, Castro dramatically moved his entire delegation from the Manhattan Shelburne Hotel, where the other nations' diplomats were staying and where Castro claimed to have experienced racism, to the Hotel Theresa in Harlem, where he met with Malcolm X and other civil rights leaders.<sup>25</sup>

23 De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*; and Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

24 This dichotomy recently received international media attention. On 2 May 2013, Assata Shakur, the former Black Panther who escaped prison in 1979 and received asylum in Cuba in 1984, became the first woman to be placed on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's list of most wanted terrorists. As a result of this controversy, Cuba's long commitment to protecting African American militants from capture by the US government has resurfaced in the public eye. Six weeks prior to this announcement, Roberto Zurbarano Torres, Afro-Cuban scholar and former editor-in-chief at Casa de las Américas, published an article in the *New York Times* called "For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun," in which he attributes the lack of progress on racial equality to the government's inaction and silence. In the week that followed, as a result of the content of the article and the title that he claimed was mistranslated, the author experienced tremendous backlash in the Cuban press and was demoted to researcher. The juxtaposition of these two events points to an enduring dissonance between Cuba's support of black liberation movements abroad and its domestic discourse on race, in which people have had to struggle, sometimes risking their careers and well-being, in order to further public dialogue on racism. See Roberto Zurbarano Torres, "For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun," trans. Kristina Cordero, *New York Times*, 24 March 2013.

25 This media spectacle was suggested by the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), a US organization of journalists that aimed to balance the negative media portrayal of the Cuban Revolution. Several African American members of the FPCC were invited to visit Cuba in July 1960 and subsequently published a series of articles on their experiences. See Todd F. Tietchen, "The Cubalogues (and after): On the Beat Literary Movement and the Early Cuban Revolution," *Arizona Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (2007): 119–53.

Castro's famous move to the Hotel Theresa and his outreach to US black activists would epitomize an ideology, which I will refer to as tricontinentalism, through which African American and Cuban radicals viewed themselves as belonging to a shared international revolutionary subjectivity forged through a single struggle against US imperialism.<sup>26</sup> This ideology was provided with an official organization through the 1966 Tricontinental, in which delegates of the liberation movements of eighty-two nations came together in Havana to form an alliance against imperialism called the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

This alliance, which formed when Cuba requested to join the Afro-Asian alliance that originated at the 1955 Bandung Conference, would explicitly include African American activists.<sup>27</sup> In the materials published leading up to the 1966 conference, the Tricontinental's International Preparatory Committee defines "support to the negro people of the United States in their struggle for the right to equality and freedom and against all forms of discrimination and racism" as part of the agenda for the upcoming meeting.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, following the first conference, the August–September 1966 issue of the *Tricontinental Bulletin* states that "although, geographically, Afro-Americans do not form part of Latin America, Africa, or Asia, the special circumstances of the oppression which they suffer, to which they are subjected, and the struggle they are waging" merits the inclusion of African Americans into the Tricontinental.<sup>29</sup> These initial displays of solidarity are consistently reiterated in the many journals, posters, and newsreels that the Tricontinental produced.

Because the Tricontinental was an international alliance, its discourse was largely shaped by its eighty-two delegations, and there was not an exact one-to-one relationship between its materials and Cuba's official positions. Indeed, the Soviet Union was not a member of the Tricontinental, and its materials contain few references to the Soviets. However, all of the Tricontinental's propaganda was produced by artists and writers from the Cuban Revolution's highly centralized cultural organizations. This includes the *Tricontinental Bulletin* (1966–88; 1995–) and *Tricontinental* magazine (1967–92; 1995–), published in English, Spanish, French, and sometimes Arabic; brightly colored pop-art posters, folded up inside *Tricontinental*, each devoted to solidarity with a different liberation struggle; books and pamphlets; radio programs; and the ICAIC Latin American Newsreel, short films made by the Cuban Film Institute and headed by famed Cuban filmmaker Santiago Álvarez.

Beyond the aesthetic of the Tricontinental's posters, whose ongoing influence can be seen in the work of contemporary artists such as Shepard Fairey and his Barack Obama "Hope"

26 Besenia Rodriguez uses the term *tricontinentalism* to refer to the "critique of global capitalism and its exploitation of the world's racialized peoples" that appears in the early 1960s FPCC articles. Besenia Rodriguez, "De la esclavitud yanqui a la libertad cubana": US Black Radicals, the Cuban Revolution, and the Formation of a Tricontinental Ideology," *Radical History Review* 92 (2005): 63.

27 *Towards the First Tricontinental Conference* 1 (1965): 4.

28 *Ibid.*, 8.

29 *Tricontinental Bulletin* 5–6 (1966): 21.



poster, the most enduring works of the Tricontinental's cultural production are the hard-hitting, fast-paced newsreels by Álvarez. These newsreels, which played weekly in Cuban theaters from 1967 to 1990 and which were distributed internationally, focused on the liberation struggles of the Tricontinental's delegations abroad as well as the achievements of the Cuban Revolution.<sup>30</sup> They exemplified what Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa would call *cine imperfecto* (imperfect cinema), an anti-Hollywood style that celebrated low-budget, amateur filmmaking as the aesthetic embodiment of revolutionary struggle. Through his signature quick cuts and aggressive zooms, Álvarez animated photographs cut out of magazines, which he juxtaposed with found and pirated news footage and set to popular music. In this way he created weekly Eisenstein-inspired montages that delivered the news through a lens that was equally propagandistic and avant-garde and created an aesthetic that would be a defining element of the Tricontinental's international propaganda campaign.

In line with the central position of African Americans within the Tricontinental, one of the most famous of these newsreels is *Now* (1965), a six-minute film by Álvarez in which images of the US civil rights movement are arranged in ironic dialogue with Lena Horne's 1963 song of the same name.<sup>31</sup> *Now*, one of the most famous Cuban films ever made, is both a report on US civil rights protests and, in the spirit of tricontinentalism, a call for further radicalization and militancy.<sup>32</sup> This film is merely one of the many articles, posters, and films that the Tricontinental devoted to the African American civil rights struggle.

Through its cultural products, such as Álvarez's films *Now* and *El movimiento Panteras negras (Black Panther Movement)* (1968), the Tricontinental consistently presented African Americans as those fighting for the same anti-imperialist cause as its delegations but from the especially important position of being inside the imperialist United States. Drawing from Communist, Pan-Africanist, and US civil rights intellectual traditions, the Tricontinental's materials repeatedly point to racial inequality in places such as the US South as evidence of the continuation of colonial power hierarchies within capitalist societies. These materials argue that just as African slavery was foundational to early colonial projects, racial discrimination and the continued exploitation of black labor is central to modern-day imperialist societies such that a struggle against imperialism is fundamentally a struggle against racism. African Americans, they claim, are especially representative of the Tricontinental because they are fighting imperialism from within the heart of US empire.

The Tricontinental helped to foment solidarity among liberation struggles around the world, supporting the creation of an impactful global revolutionary subjectivity and providing an ideological frame for Cuba's military and financial support for struggles abroad. Yet

30 Michael Chanan, *Cuban Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

31 The film was released the same year as the Tricontinental's first publication, *Towards the First Tricontinental*.

32 For an analysis of *Now* within the context of tricontinentalism, see Anne Garland Mahler, "The Global South in the Belly of the Beast: Viewing African American Civil Rights through a Tricontinental Lens," *Latin American Research Review* 50, no. 1 (2015): 95–116.

Cuba's tricontinentalism also allowed it to externalize its own racial problems, attributing racial discrimination to the imperialist North while denying its presence in Cuba.<sup>33</sup> While the Castro government supported black liberation abroad through the Tricontinental, in the domestic realm, it claimed that its redistribution of wealth had ended racial inequality and subsequently sought to silence those who critiqued that notion or who tried to organize around racial identity.

Alongside repression of Afro-Cuban organizing, the Cuban government's regulation of the activities of intellectuals in general during the early Soviet period was characterized by Castro's June 1961 speech "Palabras a los intelectuales" ("Words to the Intellectuals"), in which he defined the Revolution's cultural politics with the phrase, "Dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución, nada" ("Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing"). The speech responded to the controversy over the censorship of the 1961 film *P.M.*, a short documentary by Orlando Jiménez Leal and Sabá Cabrera Infante on Afro-Cuban nightlife that, in its depiction of drunkenness and dancing in largely segregated social spaces, was in conflict with both the image of racial equality and militant severity that the government aimed to project in the wake of the Bay of Pigs invasion.<sup>34</sup> While the closure of newspapers and radio stations that opposed the Castro government began earlier than 1961, following the censorship of *P.M.*, independent magazines and presses that supported the Revolution were shut down as the country's intellectual institutions were centralized.

The controls placed on intellectuals that began in the early sixties culminated in the 1971 Padilla affair, in which Cuban poet Heberto Padilla was imprisoned and forced to publicly repent for his 1968 book of poetry *Fuera del juego* (*Out of the Game*), an event that is generally viewed as the beginning of what Ambrosio Fornet has termed the *quinquenio gris* (five gray years), the period of intensified Stalinization of culture and repression of artistic freedoms in Cuba between 1971 and 1976. According to Desiderio Navarro, the *quinquenio gris* is a euphemism, since, on the one hand, it "in fact lasted for about fifteen years (approximately from 1968 until 1983), and, on the other, was in fact not gray but black for many intellectual lives and works."<sup>35</sup>

Guillén Landrián made *Coffea arábica* during this highly repressive period. Prior to directing the film, the filmmaker was sentenced to two years of hard labor on the Isle of Youth for what he described as ideological differences with the Cuban government.<sup>36</sup> He does not elaborate on what those ideological differences were, but beginning in the mid-1960s, in an effort to achieve greater productivity through a highly disciplined labor force, the Cuban government began policing everything from fashion and music tastes to sexual preference and

33 Sawyer, *Racial Politics*, 63.

34 William Luis, *Lunes de Revolución: Literatura y cultura en los primeros años de la Revolución Cubana* (Madrid: Verbum, 2003). Lillian Guerra views Guillén Landrián's film *Los del baile*, in its depiction of Afro-Cuban dancing and partying, as a direct response to the controversy and as a vindication of the censored *P.M.* Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 342–43.

35 Desiderio Navarro, "In Media Res Publicas: On Intellectuals and Social Criticism in the Cuban Public Sphere," trans.

Alessandro Fornazzari and Desiderio Navarro, *boundary 2* 29, no. 3 (2002): 198.

36 *Café con leche*, dir. Manuel Zayas, EICTV, 2003.

adherence to gender norms. Those who were perceived as conforming to capitalism and US culture through, for example, wearing one's hair long, listening to Beatles music, or critiquing the actions of the government even from a position of Marxism, were accused of "ideological diversionism" and were often sent to labor prison camps that were euphemistically called UMAPs, or Military Units of Assistance to Production.<sup>37</sup>

Because of psychological distress (apparently, he set a group of chickens on fire at the labor camp), Guillén Landrián was released from prison, treated with electroshock therapy at a military hospital in Havana, and placed under house arrest in Havana where he requested to be allowed to either continue making films or to leave the country.<sup>38</sup> He was returned to ICAIC but was moved from the artistic department to the department of scientific and technical documentaries, which Guillén Landrián has explained as a concession to ICAIC's management that reluctantly took him back.<sup>39</sup> *Coffea arábica*, perhaps the most politically controversial of his films, would be his first film in the scientific and technical department.

The film was to promote the Cordón de La Habana, which aimed to supply food to Havana, allowing it to become self-sufficient while redirecting labor from the state's offensive against private businesses.<sup>40</sup> It formed part of a larger deurbanization effort in this period, which posited rural communities as a moral alternative to the corruption of urban lifestyles.<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the Cordón de La Habana aimed to integrate *habaneros* into the spirit of *La Gran Zafra* (the Great Harvest), a national campaign to drastically increase sugar production throughout the late 1960s, intended to culminate in a ten-million-ton sugar crop in 1970. *La Gran Zafra* emphasized the volunteerism required to produce this massive crop as the moral prerogative of the Revolution's hardworking and disciplined *nuevo hombre* (new man). In other words, the campaign epitomized the very state discourse around labor, productivity, and discipline against which Guillén Landrián and many others' "ideological diversionism" was severely punished in the UMAPs. The Cordón de La Habana was eventually largely unsuccessful, resulting in a small agricultural yield disproportionate to the publicity surrounding it. More important, *La Gran Zafra* of 1970 fell far short of its goal, leaving behind economic difficulties and a blow to national morale. While *Coffea arábica* was commissioned as part of

37 Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción. See Guerra's in-depth discussion of youth culture and ideological diversionism in "Juventud Rebelde: Nonconformity, Gender, and the Struggle to Control Revolutionary Youth," *Visions of Power*, chap. 7.

38 *Ibid.*, 343; and *Café con leche*. While this information has been corroborated by documentaries and scholarship on Guillén Landrián, it is important to note that his mental state has served as ICAIC's primary explanation for his expulsion and erasure. This essay responds to this dismissal by addressing the direct and powerful political argument that Guillén Landrián delivered in his first film after his release from the hospital. On a similar note, I intentionally do not employ the diminutive "Nicolásito," the nickname that his friends and colleagues called him and that is commonly used as shorthand in scholarship on his work. While friends, scholars, and fans of Guillén Landrián use this nickname as a term of endearment, in other contexts, its usage can imply a condescension that, alongside discussion of his emotional and mental state, subtly diminishes the filmmaker and emphasizes his distinction from his uncle, the poet laureate Nicolás Guillén.

39 Nicolás Guillén Landrián, "El cine postergado," interview by Lara Petusky Coger, Alejandro Ríos, and Manuel Zayas, *Cuba-encuentro*, 2 September 2005, arch1.cubaencuentro.com/entrevistas/20050904/74540a9e00385c591a45bac12d946245/1.html.

40 Scarpaci, Segre, and Coyula, *Havana*, 328.

41 *Ibid.*, 206.

the promotional materials for this campaign, the didactic portions of the film, although aesthetically experimental and sophisticated, do little to clearly explain to the Havana public how to plant and grow coffee and conspicuously do not contribute to the production of the new disciplined labor force. Guillén Landrián makes his lack of interest in this area known in the section of the film on fertilization that simply states, “fertilización, ¿está claro?” (“fertilization, is it clear?”). Instead, as I will detail in the following pages, the film uses the steps for planting and growing coffee to structure a sweeping political statement on Cuba’s racial discourse, responding directly to the state’s hypocritical position toward racial equality.

### A Tricontinentalist Reading of *Coffea arábica*

Considering the controversy over *P.M.*, the importance of the ICAIC newsreels to the Tricontinental’s propaganda, as well as the gap between the Revolution’s international face of tricontinentalism and its domestic one of inclusionary discrimination, it is not surprising that there would be heightened sensitivity and censorship directed at a film that exposed Cuba’s inconsistent treatment of racial discrimination. *Coffea arábica* uses the tricontinentalist view of the exploitation of black labor as foundational to imperialism to critique the continuation of prerevolutionary race relations in postrevolutionary Cuba. *Coffea arábica* delivers its tricontinentalist argument by employing the tricontinentalist aesthetics of Álvarez’s newsreels, used to condemn racial discrimination in places such as the United States but significantly never used to discuss domestic racial inequalities, in order to denounce the perpetuation of the exploitation of black labor within the state’s agricultural campaign.

The influence of Álvarez, whose newsreels largely defined the Tricontinental’s anti-imperialist filmic aesthetic, can be seen in some of Guillén Landrián’s earlier films. For example, *Retornar a Baracoa (To Return to Baracoa)* (1966), a film that depicts life in the remote and rural town of Baracoa and that skeptically presents state development projects there, engages in some of the experimentation with montage for which Álvarez would become known, such as animation of photographs, ironic pairings of soundtrack and image, and captions that critically narrate the presented materials. However, in general, Guillén Landrián’s prior work consists of long takes set to instrumental music that lend a slow-moving and pensive quality to the films. His early films do not engage in the hyper-editing through which Álvarez communicates his hard-hitting political arguments.

Guillén Landrián’s aesthetic choices change dramatically with *Coffea arábica*, which clearly draws from Álvarez’s emphasis on quick cuts and zooms, found material and montage. Like Álvarez’s films, *Coffea arábica* reflects the clear influence of Sergei Eisenstein who theorized montage as a collision of shots that, like the explosions in a combustion engine, drives the thesis of the film forward.<sup>42</sup> Through the often ironic interaction between images, sound,

42 Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1977).

and graphic text, Guillén Landrián delivers his argument by creating associations and revealing fissures between sound and image, discourse and reality. The choice of this tricontinentalist medium is integrally tied, I suggest, to the message of the film. Through a *détournement* of Cuba's tricontinentalist discourse, Guillén Landrián appropriates the aesthetic of Álvarez's newsreels to shed light on racial inequities within the Castro government's policies and thus to expose the hypocrisy of its internationalist commitment to black freedom.

*Coffea arábica* alternates between instructional material on how to plant coffee and commentary on the history of Cuba's coffee industry. At first glance this historical commentary appears to present a tidy narrative in which the Cordón de La Habana campaign represents a revolutionary form of coffee production that liberates Cuba's proletariat from the oppressive, capitalistic coffee plantations of the past. For example, Guerra argues that through his film, Guillén Landrián "portrayed the Revolution as an inversion of the historical exploitation and marginality of blacks, depicting slaves as the intellectual authors and heroes of Fidel's contemporary *Plan Café*."<sup>43</sup> However, I argue that at the same time Guillén Landrián presents this triumphalist narrative, he subtly undermines it as well by pointing to the continuation of the racial hierarchies of the colonial past under the Revolution's present agricultural model. In this way, he launches the same critique that the Tricontinental makes of imperialist nations against the Castro regime's racial politics. Guillén Landrián achieves this critique by arguing for the continuities and similarities between three historical moments of Cuban coffee production: nineteenth-century slavery, postindependence US occupation, and postrevolutionary Cuba, positing that the revolutionary era has only supposed a continuation—rather than a heroic reversal—of the racial politics of slavery and US occupation.

The opening sequence suggests the ironic skepticism that will endure throughout the film. Guillén Landrián opens with the voice of his uncle, Nicolás Guillén, reading the final stanza of his 1958 poem "Un largo lagarto verde" ("A Long Green Lizard"), in which the poet presents the island as an alligator, once sad and enslaved, who has woken up from his slumber. The film then reiterates this transition from slavery to awakening by recalling the history of slavery within coffee production, stating that coffee was first cultivated in Wajay, a municipality of Matanzas, which because of its sugar plantations had a rapidly increasing slave population throughout the nineteenth century and which is a center of Afro-Cuban culture. Guillén Landrián further emphasizes the historical connection between coffee production and slavery by showing images from the Museo de la Gran Piedra, a nineteenth-century coffee plantation that was originally the property of French immigrants who left Haiti in the wake of the Haitian Revolution. It then cuts to a black screen with white text that states, "los negros en el cafetal como mano de obra" ("blacks in the coffee plantation as hard labor"). It reverts back to images of the plantation and then cuts again to a black screen with white letters, asking the seemingly sarcastic question, "¿cómo? ¿los negros?" ("what? blacks?"), and then providing the answer,

43 Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 347.

“sí, los negros” (“yes, blacks”). As drums begin to play in the background, a photograph of broken chains appears, followed by footage of drums and images of black Cubans dancing in traditional dress.

The juxtaposition of the dancing with broken shackles suggests dance as symbolic of a liberation from slavery that is parallel to the poetic image of the island as a formerly enslaved alligator that has awoken. However, the ironic tone in which the film asks the obvious question, “¿los negros?,” destabilizes a facile analysis of this moment of the film, introducing a subtle irony that will become more explicit when this same dance footage, to which I will return in the coming pages, appears again later in the film.

Guillén Landrián then builds on this irony by using the sequence that follows to suggest the film’s discourse as alternative to the one provided by the state and thus to metaphorically plant the seeds for his argument. After the commentary on the history of slave labor within coffee production in Cuba, the credits roll, and then a black screen with white letters announces a new section titled “preparación de la tierra” (“soil preparation”). Following a still image of a propaganda poster that equates working in agriculture to the revolutionary struggle, a voiceover of an engineer explains the process of planting coffee. The engineer speaks over the sound of typewriters while typeset letters flash on screen forming political slogans such as “seguro, seguro, a los yankis dales duro” (“for sure, for sure, hit the Yankees hard”). In this way Guillén Landrián sets up the Revolution’s official discourse, which presents agricultural labor as a patriotic act akin to fighting US imperialism.

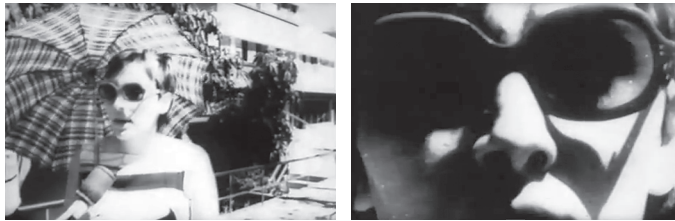
In the scenes that follow, he suggests that his film’s argument will not follow this official line. After the engineer’s report, photographs of Havana’s cityscape appear as the Cordón de La Habana radio program plays in the background. An interviewer then asks a fashionably dressed woman (wearing large sunglasses, a pixie haircut, and a patterned shift dress), who appears to be standing on Calle 23 in the busy Vedado district of Havana, her opinion on the Cordón de La Habana.<sup>44</sup> Instead of giving an opinion, she begins to explain the process of planting shade-grown coffee in the outskirts of the city, repeating nearly word for word the sound bite from the Cordón de La Habana program that played immediately before this scene. During her explanation, she switches into Bulgarian, a moment that Amelia Duarte and



Above and hereafter, scenes from Nicolás Guillén Landrián's *Coffea arábica* (1968)

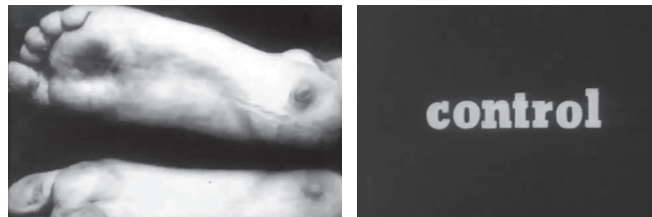
44 The woman is played by Dara Kristova, Guillén Landrián's first wife. Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 348.

Ariadna Ruiz have read as an allusion to the increasing Soviet influence over Cuba's official discourse.<sup>45</sup> As the woman is still speaking, the Supremes' "You Keep Me Hanging On" begins to steadily increase in volume in the background. With a technique strikingly similar to Álvarez in *Now*, the camera zooms in and out on different parts of the woman's face to the rhythm of the lyrics, "Set me free, why don't you, baby," suggesting that this woman needs to be freed from her rote understanding of the campaign and repetition of state propaganda. While this scene reiterates the antibourgeois and antiurban rhetoric that helped motivate volunteerism in the Revolution's agricultural campaigns, it simultaneously suggests that the liberation the film will provide will be an alternative discourse to the official one indicated by the radio program.



The film goes on to further undermine the supposed patriotism of the agricultural campaign and nuevo hombre discourse that views agricultural labor as liberatory. It presents limited information on fertilization and on the parasites and diseases that can damage the plants, explaining that plants catch diseases just like humans do. Because the film anthropomorphizes the plants' suffering, showing the *pata prieta* (an illness, literally translated as "black leg," that especially affects tobacco and that turns the roots of plants a dark color) as feet with dark plantar warts on the heels, the caption that follows—"control"—acquires multiple meanings. *Control* here seems to refer to the need to control the diseases that affect the crops before they become unmanageable, the control over the human body implicated by the opening section on slavery, and the control over the mind expressed by the woman's rote repetition of state propaganda.

This suggestion of the control over mind and body inherent within the history of the coffee industry links the opening section on slavery to the second chapter of historical commentary,



45 Duarte and Ruiz, "Collage de la nostalgia."

which introduces the three main coffee companies that were nationalized by the state and whose owners would relocate their headquarters to the United States.<sup>46</sup> After a series of captions that state, “los café TUPY, PILON, REGIL presentan” (“TUPY, PILON, REGIL coffee present”), photographs of white upper-class women are juxtaposed with images of one-room shacks and the calloused and cut hands of a worker. These photographs as well as images of white-on-black oppression, such as a photograph of three smiling white women holding a black woman by her arms as she appears to attempt to struggle free, are paired with a recording of an English lesson read by a woman in an eerie and echoing whisper. “Do you believe in Santa Claus?” the woman on the audio track asks as bombs drop, creating a direct association between the history of US occupation, signaled by the English lesson; the continued threat of US invasion, indicated by the bombs; the oppressive racial hierarchy of the island’s history of coffee production seen in the photographs; and the coffee companies that have now established themselves in Florida. In this way, the coffee companies come to embody a host of signifiers of colonial hegemony from Cuba’s past and present. “¿Quieren Uds. tomar Café REGIL? o ¿PILON? o ¿TUPY?” (“Do you want to drink REGIL Coffee? or PILON? or TUPY?”), the film asks its viewers. “No!” the audiotrack replies, with an image of guns pointed in the air, presenting yet again, as in the section on slavery, a narrative in which the Revolution’s new agricultural model liberates Cuba’s people from its oppressive past. As indicated through the notion that the woman in Havana needs to be “set free” from state propaganda, the final section of the film will destabilize this celebratory representation of the agricultural campaign.

The last half of the film is devoted to the Cordón de La Habana and to coffee production under the Revolution. Based on the repetition throughout the film of the transformation of Cuba’s enslaved past to a liberatory present, one would expect this final section to be a triumphant celebration of the new agricultural model. Instead—and here is where the film takes a turn markedly critical of the Revolution—Guillén Landrián insists on the similarities between the island’s history of coffee production and the revolutionary present.

The section begins with a celebratory tone that equates the rise of Castro with the blooming hope embodied in the agricultural campaign: the sound of marching snare drums is coupled with a black screen containing “26 de julio” (referring to Castro’s 26th of July



46 The May 1959 Agrarian Reform Law nationalized land holdings in excess of 3,333 acres, redistributing it among farmers and state cooperatives. Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 243.



movement) in block white letters and then footage of Castro ascending a platform to chants of “Fidel.” A photograph of Castro’s bearded smile appears and then dissolves into images of coffee flowers blooming.

Next, however, the film takes an unusual turn that automatically destabilizes this celebratory reading. The camera fades in and out, lending an animated quality to the subject’s actions, between a series of photographs of a seated black woman styling her straightened hair with rollers while she listens to the nightly romantic poetry reading on the Radio Baracoa station. The sequence of the woman rolling her hair is recycled from one of Guillén Landrián’s previous films, *Retornar a Baracoa*, a film that splices a proliferation of images of the poverty of rural Baracoa with footage of new development projects there, capturing the tension of these transitions and questioning the extent of the government’s commitment not only to build factories in this region but also to truly revolutionize the Baracoa community.<sup>47</sup> In *Retornar a Baracoa*, the images of the woman curling her hair are followed by a photograph of a young black man leaning on his arm and looking back toward the camera and then several photographs of him sitting on a bench in the street. In this way, Guillén Landrián suggests that the woman rolls her hair in the privacy of her home in order to satisfy the male gaze that she meets in the street. In fact, in the mid-1960s, it became common for women to wear their hair in rollers out in the fields and in public in general. This fashion statement has been viewed as part of a general emphasis on women’s new status as a substantial part of the workforce and thus liberated from a patriarchal public/private divide.<sup>48</sup> In the context of *Retornar a Baracoa*, this sequence suggests that the radical changes that have taken place throughout the country in the relationships between men and women have not taken place in the remote and impoverished Baracoa.

Yet when this sequence reappears in *Coffea arábica*, it takes on a different meaning, adding to its critique of societal, patriarchal norms a critique of racial inequality directed at state policies. Aisha Cort provides an insightful reading of the images of the woman styling her hair by reflecting on how natural hairstyles, popular among African Americans in the late 1960s as a politically charged rejection of white cultural standards of beauty, were frowned on during this period in Cuba. Black Cubans who wore their hair naturally were associated with the Black Power movement and were persecuted.<sup>49</sup> This was consistent with the Cuban government’s general rejection of countercultural influences imported from the North, such as men wearing long hair or jewelry, rock music, and any other clothing or behaviors that were viewed as reflecting US or European influence. However, even considering this general trend, it is noteworthy that at the same time Cuba, through the Tricontinental, was producing

47 Guillén Landrián’s later films often recycle images and sequences from his previous unreleased films, creating intertextual references to his own work and adding yet another layer of subtle critique of ICAIC’s processes of censure and silence.

48 Guerra, *Visions of Power*, 225.

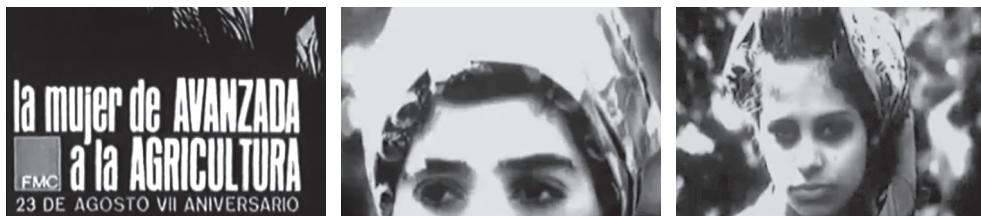
49 This policy changed after Angela Davis’s visit to Cuba in 1972, when a pro-Soviet African American was seen wearing her hair naturally. Moore, *Castro*, 303.

celebratory films and propaganda materials on US black activism that featured photographs and film footage of activists who wore their hair naturally in Afros, the appropriation of this symbology by Afro-Cubans would be suppressed. “Landrián challenges the authenticity and revolutionary value of straightened hair,” Cort writes, “and also reevaluates the stigma and negative connotations of the natural characteristics of black hair.”<sup>50</sup>



Building on Cort's reading of the film's commentary on the stigma against natural hairstyles in 1960s Cuba, I suggest this moment of the film as encapsulating what will be its central critique of the state's hypocrisy regarding its commitment to black freedom. Hair here signals the distance between the rhetoric of tricontinentalism and Cuba's domestic racial discourse and suppression of black organizing. Like in *Retornar a Baracoa*, *Coffea arábica* cuts briefly to the photograph of the young man looking at the camera, thus maintaining the association between the woman's hairstyle and the male gaze. However, in *Coffea arábica*, this photograph is followed by magazine clippings reporting on women's heroic role in the agricultural project coupled with choral voices singing, “Libertad” (“Freedom”). Significantly, the film then cuts to footage of white women wearing their hair in rollers and working in the fields. This juxtaposition drives home the incongruity between the societal control over black women's hairstyles and the rhetoric of the agricultural campaign that encourages these same women to be active participants in revolutionary society. Only white women, it seems, have been allowed to achieve this *libertad* that is embodied in wearing their curlers out to the fields, while black women are forced to continue to meet patriarchal and racist standards of beauty.

Guillén Landrián makes this critique of racial inequality much more explicit in the footage that follows in which he presents the viewer with a racial hierarchy within the division of labor in the agricultural campaign. For example, he shows the *secaderos* (dryers) as white women



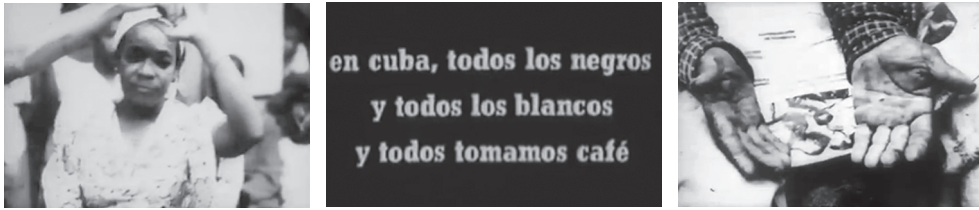
50 Cort, “Negrometrage,” 62.

talking and laughing as they leisurely dry the coffee beans with their shovels. Minutes later, he presents black women working in a loud threshing factory. This subtle representation of the division of labor along racial lines ironizes the film's statement that in order to work in the threshing room, one has to have good sight and *buenos ojos* (good eyes). As Guillén Landrián cuts to a close-up of a black woman's eyes, he imbues this supposed requirement of good eyesight with racial connotations.



The film's commentary on the racial division of labor is then followed by footage of black and white Cubans drinking coffee, a cheering crowd, Castro ascending a platform to give a speech, and then, significantly, the same footage of drumming and dancing that appeared toward the beginning of the film in association with the history of coffee plantation slavery. While one might view this dancing as parallel to the celebratory tone expressed by the cheering crowd waiting for Castro's speech, considering the racial divisions in Guillén Landrián's representation of the Cuban government's agricultural project, the reappearance of this footage from the section on slavery suggests the continuity of racial hierarchies that divide labor under the Revolution. This ambiguous moment in the film is then paired with the caption, "en Cuba, todos los negros y todos los blancos y todos tomamos café" ("in Cuba, all blacks and all whites and everyone drinks coffee"). This phrase revises the famous lyrics, "Ay, Mamá Inés, todos los negros tomamos café" ("Ay, Mama Inés, all us blacks drink coffee"), from a song that was originally composed by plantation slaves, then used in the caricaturesque *bufo* theatre and made internationally famous by Afro-Cuban musician Ignacio Villa.<sup>51</sup> Although one could view this revision of the slave song to the more egalitarian concept that "everyone" drinks coffee—and, more important, harvests coffee—as a triumphant portrayal of the Revolution's achievements, both the dance footage that precedes this statement and the images that come afterward will call this reading into question. As the Beatles' song "The Fool on the Hill" begins to play—which is already suggestive of the contestatory nature of the film because the Beatles were banned on the radio in the mid-1960s in Cuba—the photograph of the worker's calloused hands from the section on US imperialism appears, suggesting yet again the continuity between the inequality of Cuba's prerevolutionary past and its present. In this sense,

51 *Teatro bufo* is a nineteenth-century satirical theater form in which actors parodied the customs of the lower classes of Cuban society. In addition to shaping national identity, it also helped to create many of the nation's most entrenched racial stereotypes.



the seemingly guileless celebratory phrase that all blacks and all whites drink coffee becomes permeated with an irony that works to undermine the state's celebratory rhetoric and that connects, rather than divorces, that rhetoric to the oppressive history of Cuban agriculture.

Fin pero no es el fin

Through presenting the racial hierarchies of coffee production within three distinct moments of Cuban history (nineteenth-century slavery, postindependence US imperialism, and postrevolutionary Cuba), *Coffea arábica* makes an argument that is very similar to the one presented in Afro-Cuban writer Walterio Carbonell's censored 1961 text, *Crítica: Cómo surgió la cultura nacional*. Carbonell argues that the exploitation of black labor has characterized Cuban history. He states that the Republic's egalitarian banner "Con todos y para todos" ("With all and for all") served as a legitimizing rhetoric for the continuation of white domination post-independence. He warns that this ideology is being perpetuated within the Castro government's rhetoric and urges a revision of what he calls "el poder ideológico de la burguesía" (the ideological power of the bourgeoisie).<sup>52</sup> Guillén Landrián and Carbonell had previously collaborated on the statement on race in Cuba that was prohibited from being presented at the 1968 World Cultural Congress. When we view *Coffea arábica* within the context of Carbonell's argument, the celebratory phrase, "in Cuba all blacks and all whites and everyone drinks coffee," contains yet another layer of skepticism toward this simplistic image of racial harmony.

In addition to its allusion to Carbonell's critique, the film points to the state's hypocrisy—supporting black struggles abroad while furthering inequalities at home—through employing the very aesthetic form of Álvarez's newsreels that was used by the Tricontinental to critique racial discrimination abroad. Guillén Landrián appropriates a tricontinentalist ideology (in which racial inequality is viewed as evidence of a continuation of colonialism) and a tricontinentalist aesthetic (Álvarez's newsreels) to argue that the Revolution does not measure up to its tricontinentalist ideals. In this sense, although the Cuban Revolution was largely responsible for the publication and dissemination of the Tricontinental's posters, films, and journal, through which it would externalize racism to the imperialist North, the film is a testament to how tricontinentalism as a discourse transcends the Cuban Revolution and could even be employed as

<sup>52</sup> Walterio Carbonell, *Crítica: Cómo surgió la cultura nacional* (Havana: Yaka, 1961), 19.

a critique of it. This discourse would continue to circulate within radicalist circles inside and outside of Cuba long after the international Left grew disillusioned with Castro's government, maintaining its influence even in contemporary notions of transnational subaltern resistance.

Guillén Landrián ended most of his films with the phrase, "Fin pero no es el fin" ("The end, but it is not the end"), thus suggesting the work of art as an incomplete process intended to foster further debate and reflection. After many years of erasure, *Coffea arábica* is still the powerful and provocative film that Guillén Landrián intended. It gives voice to a largely silenced Afro-Cuban counterdiscourse formulated during the first decade of the Revolution and during the early years of Cuba's Soviet period. In this way, it remains an enduring and bold critical statement on the Castro government's complex racial politics.

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