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On its 60th Anniversary: Reviewing 'Fidel and Malcolm X: Memories of a meeting'

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Fidel Castro and Malcolm X at the Hotel Theresa In Harlem, 1960.

On Sept. 19, 1960, thousands of New Yorkers embraced 125th Street and Seventh Avenue to greet Premier Fidel Castro's arrival. For 24 hours that day, Harlem's streets were carpeted by the energy and warmth of its people.

These were rare events indeed, rivaled only by another event some 30 years later when Nelson Mandela stood on almost the same street corner, looking over the sea of Black faces cheering his homecoming to the Black capital of the world.

— “Fidel and Malcolm: Memories of a Meeting” by Rosemari Mealy (pg.14)

- Also: [60th anniversary of President Fidel Castro's historic New York visit](#)

Sept. 18, 2020, marked 60 years since the Cuban delegation arrived in New York City for Prime Minister Fidel Castro to address the fifteenth session of the United Nations General Assembly. Sept. 19 is when 35-year-old Nation of Islam Minister Malcolm X and 34-year-old Cuban head of state Fidel Castro had a historic meeting of the minds on the ninth floor of the Black-owned Hotel Theresa in one of the poorest, predominately Black neighborhoods in New York: Harlem.

How did this happen? There are many stories written about the circumstances which led to the Cuban delegation checking into Hotel Theresa and the meeting of Malcolm X and Fidel Castro. But what really happened between Sept. 18, when the Cuban delegation arrived in New York and Sept. 28, when the delegation flew back to Havana, Cuba?

Let the truth be told

“Fidel and Malcolm X: Memories of a Meeting” was compiled by Rosemari Mealy with voices from Cuba and the U.S. who added their perspectives as historians, poets, journalists and political activists.

First published in 1993, Mealy explains In the introduction to the 2013 second edition that the book was “inspired by a 1990 ‘Malcolm X Speaks’ symposium commemorating Malcolm X’s 65th birthday held In Cuba. The symposium was organized by Mealy and Assata Shakur and hosted by the Casa De Las Americas Cultural Center in Havana.

The timing of the symposium also commemorated the 30th anniversary of the meeting of Malcolm X and Fidel Castro. “It was an unforgettable moment when Cuba’s former U.N. Ambassador Raúl Roa Kouri and renowned Afro-Cuban journalist Reinaldo Penalver addressed the symposium, mesmerizing the participants with their vivid and colorful stories, reflections and memories of the famed encounter between two of the greatest leaders of the 20th century.”

It was at this symposium that we learned that Roa should be credited for arranging the logistics of that meeting and Penalver personally interviewed Malcolm or, as he told it, Malcolm interviewed him.

“For Havana to host the symposium was clearly a recognition of Malcolm’s contribution to the worldwide struggle for justice and quality. In the view of many, it was an important contribution to the internationalizing of Malcolm X thought.”

Cubans have access to the writings of Malcolm X. Their publishing houses were some of the first to translate his ideas into a foreign language. In Cuban language schools, Malcolm’s speeches are required texts for future translators and interpreters.

The Cuban delegation arrives in New York and moves from the Shelburne Hotel to Hotel Theresa

Prior to the arrival of the delegation, Raúl Roa Kouri spoke to Robert Tabor, one of the founding members of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), who said that Malcolm X had suggested that the Cuban delegation stay at the Hotel Theresa. Rao mentioned this idea to the delegation, but when he returned to the Cuban Mission, he was informed that the Shelburne Hotel, located near the Cuban Consulate, had been chosen to house the delegation.

On Sunday, Sept. 18, 1960, when the Cuban delegation arrived in New York City, the Cuban revolution was one year old. The administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower and counterrevolutionary Cubans had already begun a policy of hostility towards Cuba and Prime Minister Fidel Castro.

The delegation was greeted by cheering crowds of patriotic Cubans who lined the airport route. A reactionary group of Cuban exiles called “Rosa Blanca” (White Rose) formed a picket line in front of the hotel, provoking terrorism by threatened to blow

up the Shelburne Hotel. There was a line of police separating the U.S. Cuban exiles from the hotel entrance.

On Monday, Sept. 19, the hotel manager told Roa to inform his prime minister that the hotel was in grave danger of being severely damaged by protesters, and he must deposit a \$20,000 security fee in order to stay in this hotel. Fidel was outraged. Security and maintaining order were problems for the New York City police. His response to the manager was for Roa to tell him to his face, "You are a gangster and we are not paying a single cent," at which time the manager told Roa that the delegation would be evicted from the hotel. Fidel's response was to leave the hotel immediately.

Fidel began pacing the hotel room preparing to leave and looking at the options for the delegation, which included purchasing tents and camping outside of the U.N. That is when Roa told him about Malcolm X's suggestion to stay at the Hotel Theresa. Fidel asked, where is the Hotel Theresa? Roa replied, "In Harlem." Fidel repeated, "In Harlem? In the Black ghetto?" Fidel told Raul to contact Tabor and go see Malcolm X and book rooms.

Conrad Lynn, an African American civil rights lawyer, political activist and member of FPCC, contacted Love Woods, manager of the Hotel Theresa, who hesitated at first because there might be difficulties in cashing a check from Fidel. He would need cash. Lynn got the cash from a sympathetic gambler in Harlem after explaining the situation. The gambler, whom Lynn did not name, was Black and paid one thousand dollars to Woods. The Cuban delegation checked into the Hotel Theresa the night of Sept. 19.

The government tried to put pressure on Mr. Woods, but he responded that this was a public hotel and they could not dictate who he rented the rooms to. Mr. Woods made it clear to Lynn that he did not want to get politically involved and that he was renting the room as a proprietor and did not endorse any of Fidel's ideas.

Woods, in his late 80s at the time, was a vocal and respected leader in the Harlem community. "Almost everyone that I interviewed spoke of the respect Love [Woods] garnered when he refused to back down in his commitment to host the Cuban delegation," observed Reinaldo Penalver.

So that is how the Cuban delegation came to stay in Harlem at the Theresa Hotel, making Fidel the first international leader to set foot on Harlem soil in a public way.

The news that the Cuban delegation was moving to Harlem was not well received by the U.N. What an embarrassment! Word was out that the Cubans were moving to Harlem or pitching tents on the U.N. grounds. The U.S. Secret Service was getting anxious, and the Cubans began receiving calls from the best hotels in town, offering suites and entire floors, free of charge.

Fidel announced that the delegation was going to stay at Hotel Theresa in Harlem: "That is where the Black people live; that is where the working-class people live; that is where Latin Americans live. That is where we are going to go because our revolution is the revolution of the humble, the revolution of the poor, the revolution of racial integration and anti-racism."

Meeting with Malcom X at midnight on Sept. 19

To see Fidel at the Hotel Theresa meant getting past a small army of New York City police guarding the building, and U.S. and Cuban security. Malcolm X gained entry because he had recently been named to a welcoming committee for dignitaries set up by Harlem's 288th police precinct. Fidel did not want to be bothered with reporters, but he consented to see two representatives of the Black press.

The meeting lasted about 15 minutes according to journalist Jimmy Booker of Amsterdam News, who spoke with Malcolm before the meeting at which time Malcolm said, "I just want to welcome Fidel." A translator introduced the various

people who came to greet and welcome the Cuban delegation. But the language barrier made it difficult for the two to converse even with the interpreter. In summary, Booker saw this as a meeting of two people exchanging ideas and experiences.

Ralph D. Matthews from New York Citizens-Call said that Cuba's Castro and Harlem's Malcolm covered much political and philosophical ground. Castro spoke of his troubles at the Shelburne Hotel, racism and racial discrimination, the media, Africa, and told Malcolm that he would speak in "the Hall" (the U.N. General Assembly). Fidel said, "There is a tremendous lesson to be learned at this session. Many things will happen in this session, and the people will have a clearer idea of their rights."

Cuban journalist Reinaldo Penalver recalled that the presence of Fidel and the Cuban delegation became something of an event for the entire Harlem community. There were mobilizations 24 hours a day. Every time Fidel left for the U.N. or came back, there was always a demonstration, chanting "Long live Castro!" Hundreds of men and women were always cheering, "Viva Fidel!"

Highlights of the Cuban delegation's visit to Harlem at the famed Theresa Hotel.

After the trips to the U.N. General Assembly, Castro spent the next few days in Harlem meeting several heads of states. When President Eisenhower excluded him from a Sept. 22 luncheon for Latin American leaders, Castro held his own banquet in the Theresa's ballroom and invited "the poor and humble people of Harlem" to join him. At a news briefing, Castro told reporters, "I will be honored to lunch with the poor and humble people of Harlem. I belong to the poor, humble people."

On Sept. 21, the FPCC held a reception for the delegation in the Hotel Theresa banquet hall hosted by Richard Gibson, president of the committee. Among the

attendees were poet Langston Hughes, Columbia University professor C. Wright Mills, poet Allen Ginsberg and French photographer Henri Cartier-Besson.

The Harlem branch of the Communist Party of the U.S., under the leadership of political prisoner Ben Davis, held a rally in Harlem in solidarity with Cuba on Sept. 24.

The Cuban delegates were guests of Ghanaian Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah. They received visits from Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, President Gamal Abdel Nassar of United Arab Republic, India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Foreign Minister V.K. Krishna Menon and Bulgarian Leader Todor Zhivkov at the Hotel Theresa.

On Sept. 26, Fidel addressed the U.N. General Assembly for four-and-a-half hours. He assured the gathering that he would "endeavor to be brief" before launching into a searing monologue that holds the U.N. record to this day. The transcript of Fidel's speech can be found on the internet by googling "Fidel Castro addresses the U.N. General Assembly in 1960."

On the evening of Sept. 28, the Cuban delegation checked out of the Hotel Theresa and left for the airport only to find that their planes had been seized by American creditors. Soviet leader Khrushchev stepped forward and was happy to lend the Cubans a luxury Soviet airliner for their return to Havana.

Fidel ended his powerful, articulate speech to the fifteenth U.N. General Assembly by summarizing the policy of the revolutionary government of Cuba:

"Therefore, the National General Assembly of the Cuban People proclaims before America, and proclaims here before the world, the right of the peasants to the land; the right of the workers to the fruits of their labor; the right of the children to education: the right of the sick to medical care and hospitalization; the right of

young people to work; the right of students to free vocational training and scientific education; the right of Negroes, and Indians to full human dignity; the right of women to civil, social and political equality; the right of the elderly to security in their old age; the right of intellectuals, artists and scientists to fight through their works for a better world; the right of States to nationalize imperialist monopolies, thus rescuing their national wealth and resources; the right of nations to their full sovereignty; the right of peoples to convert their military fortresses into schools, and to arm their workers — because in this we too have to be arms-conscious, to arm our people in defense against imperialist attacks — their peasants, their students, their intellectuals, Negroes, Indians, women, young people, old people, all the oppressed and exploited, so that they themselves can defend their rights and their destinies.”

Long Live Fidel and the Cuban Revolution!

For more on Fidel's Visit to Harlem in 1960, read all of Fidel's speech at
<http://www.fidelcastro.cu/en/discursos/speech-un-headquarters-us-september-26-1960>

“Fidel and Malcolm X: Memories of a Meeting” by Rosemari Mealy [is available at](http://www.blackclassicbooks.com/e-book-fidel-malcolm-x-memories-of-a-meeting-rosemari-mealy/)
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<https://www.struggle-la-lucha.org/2020/09/29/on-its-60th-anniversary-reviewing-fidel-and-malcolm-x-memories-of-a-meeting/>