The True "Tesoras" of The Cuban Literacy Campaign: A Conversation with "Maestra" Director, Catherine Murphy

Megan Myers, Vanderbilt University
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Maestra (2011), a documentary film by Catherine Murphy, shares the personal testimonies of nine women who were among the 250,000 volunteers, or brigadistas, of the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961. These young Cuban volunteers, of which the majority were females, a large percentage minors, were sent to rural communities island-wide and succeeded in teaching over 700,000 individuals to read and write. The lyrics to the song at the end of the film, a musical accompaniment to the still shots of the gleeful volunteers parading through Havana celebrating the culmination of a successful year-long National Campaign, embrace the thematic backbone of Maestra:

Yo sabía leer en tus ojos
Lo que tu alma me quería decir
Ahora puedo leerlo en tus cartas
Ahora empiezo mi amor a vivir
La patria me ha dado un tesoro
He aprendido a leer y a escribir

The lyrics of the song alone, written by Cuban composer Eduardo Saborit during the literacy campaign and later made into a contemporary song by up-and-coming Venezuelan artist, Heyleen Williams, speaks to a much broader message the film represents. The original poem, “Despertar,” written over a half-century ago by Saborit is repurposed or reinterpreted by Williams—given a contemporary twist—for consumption in today’s world, a world that often struggles to grapple with the past. Murphy, too, in allowing for nine brigadistas to share their personal stories, reenvisioned history and provides a chance for the people of Cuba to put faces to a specific moment and movement of their past, a true revolutionary triumph. As Murphy makes clear in the following interview, it is the people—the experience of the many teachers of the Literacy Campaign—that initially attracted her to the story and it is their strong testimonies, so vividly recounted, that hold meaningful lessons
Megan Jeanette Myers: First off, I want to share with you how much I enjoyed the film and the message. I actually teared up at the end when a few of the interviewees, also with tears in their eyes, spoke about this life-changing experience, and what it meant to them to volunteer their time selflessly. To pull direct quotes from the documentary, “enseñar es lo más bello que hay en la vida” and “enseñar es un arte” are two that really highlight the reciprocal nature of teaching, a meaningful process for both teacher and student. I think we see this liberation theme when we consider that the teachers, the brigadistas, got their first taste of freedom when they entered the Literacy Campaign. And, at the same time, they gave illiterate Cubans their own freedom, through the ability to read and write. How do you envision this two-part freedom? Is it something that came about organically while filming?

Catherine Murphy: The story was inspired by a couple of the women I knew who were part of the Literacy Campaign, and their stories about how much this experience impacted their lives. So, the film was motivated by the experience of the teachers. And they talk about teaching as a reciprocal endeavor. In fact, it is often teachers that learn the most, and an open-minded teacher can be open to learn as much from their students as they impart. So yes, the film looks at teaching as a two-way experience, but it also looks at the broader issue of service and the transformative power of service. The testimonies we gathered from the young teachers show that giving something huge to someone else—something meaningful enough to change their life—liberates the giver along with the recipient. Having that transformative experience at such young ages allowed them one of the great joys of life. And these teachers carried that with them forever.

MJM: I was happy to see how a group of the women interviewed continued with this passion for education, the Literacy Campaign opening the doors for them and leading them toward careers in education. This continued interest, an interest that started for these brigadistas at such a young age, really speaks to the formative experience of teaching and volunteering.
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CM: Absolutely! There were a quarter-million volunteer teachers on the Literacy Campaign in 1961. About 100,000 of them were between fourteen and seventeen years old, largely high school students. Many of those high school students fell in love with teaching during the Literacy Campaign, became teachers afterward, and spent their lives as educators. Some of them dedicated their lives to adult literacy work. In fact, a small group of them, led by profesora Leonela Relys who was fourteen years old as a brigadista in 1961, developed an adult literacy methodology called “Yo sí puedo,” which has been used with great success in both undeveloped and developed countries around the world.

MJM: I was interested, too, in the fifteen days of training the teachers had. The shockingly brief teacher-training session reminded me in a way of the Teach for America Fellows here in the United States. Often many of them have no experience teaching, and then they receive this one-month crash course after which they are thrown into the schools. Seeing the fifteen days of training these students received, a majority of whom were just in high school, reminded me how it is certainly one thing to know how to read and write and a completely other thing to teach someone else to do the same. I also thought it was really interesting to consider the material they brought with them to the campos, or wherever they were teaching, in order to teach illiterate Cubans and carry out their volunteer work. In the still images many of the groups seem to be reading a book titled “Venceremos.” Did you talk to the interviewees at all about the materials they used to teach? Was it revolutionary material?

CM: The young teachers were given two weeks of formal training in Varadero. They were given two books: a student workbook and a teacher guide, called la cartilla y el manual. They were very basic. They also learned to use the kerosene lanterns, because many of them would go into the mountains where there was no electricity. The cartilla was the student workbook, and contained the literacy lessons. While there definitely was some political content, much of it was “el mar está quieto” and “la luna está llena.” So, a majority of the content was not political per se, although it was certainly a political education process. The cartilla was titled “Venceremos” which had a double meaning. It meant that illiteracy could be overcome—by the individual, the community and the nation—and it also was a major political rallying cry of the time; “Venceremos” symbolizing the promise of revolution and newfound independence.

The manual (teacher guide) opened by saying, “Show tremendous concern for all of the problems your students face. Illiteracy is just one of them.” They were also
trying to create a culture of solidarity, you see. The idea that illiteracy was just one of
the many problems that rural people struggled with is a very important piece of how
the teacher training was framed. Also, they were not sent up into the mountains
alone. They had adult support people, who were mostly teachers themselves, and who
spent the year hiking through the mountains and visiting the different homes. Each
support person was responsible for about twenty brigadistas, so there was pedagogical
backup. But much of why the young teachers were so successful was their sheer
determination. Teachers need good preparation, but they also need dedication,
passion, and love, if you will—to really care that their students learn. If a teacher really
cares but doesn’t have good training, they will clearly face difficulties. But if the
opposite is true—if they have a lot of training but don’t really care, forget it. Teaching
is an act of love. I think that is really demonstrated by the testimonies we collected.

MJM: Agreed. I think most teachers would agree as well that teaching, in large part,
is an act of love.

This next question has to do with the politics surrounding the campaign. You
start the film with the Fidel Castro speech in 1960 announcing the project as a
“gran batalla contra el analfabetismo,” and later we see more politically charged
shots and dialogue concerning Playa Girón and its aftermath. Was it difficult to
decide which political moments to include and when to do so? You mention in an
interview for the Traverse City Film Festival that you really wanted to stay away from
the macro-political perspective and focus more on the story of the people. Why was
this focus important to you? Do you see it as the less common approach in similar
films about Cuba?

CM: I think that global leaders often get the credit—all the credit and all the blame—
for history, for historical decisions, for historical processes, but there are so many
invisible actors involved in each historical moment. We need to look closer at
people’s history, at invisible histories and the testimonial perspectives on history.
The Literacy Campaign is known and celebrated in Cuba and Latin America, but
quite unknown outside the region. Even in Cuba, people know it from a macro-
political perspective, so many younger generation Cubans have not heard the
personal stories as much, which take a more intimate look at the experience. In
Maestra we share the testimonies of eight young women who speak in very personal
ways about that experience and what it meant in their lives. An archival photo
comes to mind of a very young boy who is around eight or nine, teaching an elderly
man how to write. He has both of his little hands wrapped around the older
gentleman’s hand, which holds a pencil. You see the sheer determination in the
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young volunteer’s face, and a look into the very personal experiences that moved people to join the campaign.

Also, in terms of Cuba, we most often hear the story of those who left Cuba at that time, why they left and their perspectives on what was happening. But, for me, once I arrived in Cuba, I saw there was another side to that story. I was curious about why someone would have stayed in Cuba at that time, and what those who stayed were thinking and dreaming. There have been decades of conflict between Cuba and the United States since then, but governments aside, many people stayed in Cuba because they envisioned a different kind of society and threw their lives into trying to build it. So, in spite of the very diverse opinions about Cuba today, I see the Literacy Campaign as a magical moment, in which many Cubans who stayed on the island had beautiful dreams of what they wanted their nation to be. That is part of what I wanted to explore in the film.

MJM: When you just said “magical moment” it made me think about how, perhaps, the creation of the film was a magical process in itself—a story that kind of fell into your lap in a way. You had one initial contact and you had heard stories from your grandma, correct? But, then all of the sudden, these other women were coming forward, and they had stories to be told. Can you explain the process of putting it all together?

CM: Yes, I grew up on stories about Cuba from my great-aunt and my grandmother, but all their relatives left after 1959. So it was fascinating, when I first went to Cuba, to meet people whose families chose to stay and participate in very active ways in transforming their society. Daysi Veitia, for example, who was the first woman we interviewed, and was the initial inspiration for the film. She talked about the Literacy Campaign as a defining moment of her life, and I was curious. . . . What was the larger story there? What does say about those who stayed in Cuba after 1959? And what are the lessons for the rest of us? What are the lessons for Latin America, the Caribbean, and the developing world? What are the lessons for the United States? There are many. One of the lessons is that regular people can change history. And that each of us has a lot to give. Young people have a lot to give. Elders have a lot to give. Women have a lot to give. Something as important as education makes a difference, and education can be made accessible to all. I think that is a critically important issue in the United States today, and around the world.

MJM: Definitely. Thinking about education and the importance of education and even thinking furthermore about education specifically in the United States, I really
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like what you have done with the film. I love how on your website you have a tab for educators and a study guide page that outlines how teachers can discuss the film with their students. I recently, too, just looking at the Facebook page of Maestra, saw a post that caught my eye; it read: “Question for educators: What texts best accompany the themes and ideas that are raised in Maestra? What articles or books are you using to talk about Cuba, literacy in Latin America, and the challenges facing public education in the United States and Latin America?” These are some of the questions you were just mentioning, but what has the response of educators been to the film? Have they been using it in their classrooms?

CM: I am delighted that a number of educators in United States universities have begun using the film, to teach a range of different subjects. We are also working with high school teachers. We conducted a day-long teacher workshop at Vanderbilt, organized by the Center for Latin American Studies and held at the Peabody School of Education. About twenty teachers participated. We watched Maestra in the morning and then discussed it. We asked the teachers if the film would be useful to their subject areas and what else they might need to use it into the classroom. We did the same thing a week later at Tuskegee University. We are now designing curriculum guides for different grade levels and subject areas. These will be available as free downloads on our website. One of the things we have seen when screening in high schools is that students, in some deep way, see that the story is about them, probably because the film protagonists were high school age when they went to out to teach. It is striking. We do not always acknowledge the many constructive, positive things that young people have to teach and to give. So when students say they feel affirmed by the film, it is really wonderful.

MJM: I wanted to ask you, too, about the collaborators of the film. I know among the many are Luisa Campos, Director of the Literacy Museum in Havana, and Lidia Turner, President of the Pedagogical Association of Cuba. What do you think has drawn such individuals to Maestra? Did you meet them in the process of producing the film or did they come forward and introduce themselves to you? It looks as though they have been promoting the film within Cuba as well.

CM: I tracked them down. I wrote to Luisa Campos early on, to request research access to their archives. In the process, she ended up functioning as an important research consultant, helping us track down some of the youngest teachers. The Literacy Museum is on the outskirts of Havana, and archives all the original
application forms submitted by the volunteers who went on the Literacy Campaign in 1961.

MM: No way! Wow.

CM: Yes, thousands of planillas in fourteen year-old handwriting, with fourteen year-old photographs, and the authorization signatures of the parents. Well, in the case of Adria Santana, she forged her dad’s signature. . . . Her mom signed, but her father would not. So her application is there in the museum with her dad’s forged signature. The Literacy Museum also houses all of the letters that the newly literate students wrote. It is an incredible archive, and the relevance for scholars interested in Latin American history—and education history—is immeasurable. The Literacy Campaign was a fascinating moment in the social history of the Americas. Also, since education is key to social development, and to advancing social, racial, and gender equality, this experience of involving a whole society in making education accessible to all is quite important.

MJM: You just mentioned the one interviewee who forged her parent’s names in order to be able to go, and one of my observations from the film I wanted to ask you about has to do with how a lot of the parents of the brigadistas really did not want their children to go. I mean, these were young students, like we mentioned earlier. One interviewee, for example, says that when she filled out her application her “mamá puso el grito en el cielo.” That line just cracked me up. And then another interviewee, who you mentioned previously, forged her father’s signature. I think these instances, and you have spoken to this before, really highlight the dedication and passion of these young Cubans, and it is a passion only intensified by the fact most were minors at the time. When you were interviewing the women for the documentary, did you still sense the same sort of passion and energy for life? It seems like they were such strong individuals.

CM: Yes, they really are incredible women! I was moved with how passionately they spoke about their lives and how vivid their memories are. They talk about the Campaign like it was yesterday. I never felt like I was researching something that happened half a century ago. They remembered dates, names and places, it was so immediate for them, lo tenían al flor de piel. It was striking how all of them said it was a defining moment in their lives, and this is really why I chose to focus on the young women. Most of the young men’s parents supported them going: “Ve a la montaña,
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haz algo grande por tu país y hazte hombre,” But when the young women went home to tell their parents they wanted to join the campaign, the parents were very reticent, and some vehemently refused. They were very young, and it was a dangerous time. And going into the mountains alone violated all gender codes of the time. So the young women began a process of family negotiation, and collectively negotiated a degree of autonomy that had not existed for Cuban women until that time. It was a before and after moment for them. They say it was the first time they felt strong, brave, capable, and free. Gina Rey says, “Aprendí a valer por mí misma”; Norma Guillard says, “Me enamoré de esa sensación de independencia.” Well, they never looked back. When the campaign ended, the young volunteers were offered academic scholarships in a wide variety of fields. Daysi Veitia studied architecture and became one of the country’s leading hospital architects. Norma Guillard became a social psychologist. She is a key player in the ongoing dialogue around race and gender justice, and the LGBT equality movement. She is an advisor to UNESCO. Adria Santana moved to Havana and studied theatre, becoming one of Cuba’s leading stage and television actresses. These life paths followed a transformational experience in which they first had to work hard to convince their parents to let them go, then overcome challenges of a year in the mountains, unlearning the many limitations placed on them as women, and see how they helped changed the lives of their students and the history of their country.

MJM: Right, and even the courage of the women, just young ladies at the time, is striking. After Playa Girón and after the death of fellow brigadista Manuel Ascunce, the majority of the comments of the interviewees regarding the moment were that these events only gave them extra motivation to keep doing what they were doing, as though they felt like they could not stop, they felt they had to fulfill a mission, their mission, Cuba’s mission.

CM: Many parents went up into the mountains after Playa Girón, and also after Manuel Ascunce was killed, and tried to convince their kids to come home. But almost none of them left. The parents went home empty-handed. It is astonishing, when you think about it now. It was dangerous, but there is something in that story that goes right to “el alma de la cubanía” . . . this incredibly deep sense of patriotism.

MJM: And even the deep sense of community and family that was created between the brigadistas and the campo communities—the young literacy teachers were out there doing daily chores with them, working the land, and they, too, became
members of these families and formed very intimate relationships. I was wondering if you spoke with any literacy teachers who have returned to these temporary homes and families?

CM: Many of them kept in touch with their former students, usually rural families, for the rest of their lives. In some cases, the rural children even moved to the cities to live with the urban families of the brigadistas. Marta Monzote, a leading Cuban agroecologist who had been an alfabetizadora, stayed in touch with the rural family she taught for her whole life. She went to see them in Pinar del Río each year. She took her grown kids. So many permanent bonds were forged there.

We went up into the mountains on horseback looking for alfabetizados. Our whole film crew went up on mule-back together, looking for former literacy students. The houses are so spread out in that region, so we only found a few families. The rural family that we included in the film housed a literacy worker in their home. I asked them so many questions about how their lives changed, how the way they felt about themselves had changed after learning how to read and write. . . . But that is not at all how they think about the experience! The rural families were not nearly as interested in talking about the literacy classes themselves or teaching content. Their memories are more about the family relationships that were built—and the young people who came to live with them, working with them in the daytime, and teaching classes on nights and weekends. It is really incredible the degree of family-level bonds that were created. There are many ways to read that relationship, but one of the most important outcomes of the campaign was to bridge the chasm that existed between urban and rural people. Havana was one of the most elegant, prosperous cities in the Americas, but the level of marginalization and isolation that existed in the rural mountains is quite hard to imagine. Some families didn’t know what the Cuban flag looked like, or who José Martí was. Some did not even know they lived on an island or that the world was round. How does a thirteen year-old teach a grown man that the world is round? The young urban volunteers had to learn how to teach those things; and at the same time they had to learn how to use a machete and a hoe. They had to earn rural peoples’ respect in order to be able to teach them. These stories came out powerfully in the testimonies we collected.

MJM: That is amazing. I also was very drawn to the music in the film. I love “Yemaya” by Bayuba Cante, that you used in the project trailer and the song that ends the film, “Despertar.” Was this song written especially for the film?

CM: Yes and no. The lyrics to “Despertar” were written by Cuban songwriter-poet Eduardo Saborit during the literacy campaign. It is a love song in the voice of someone
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who just learned to read and write. Saborit’s lyrics were put to contemporary music by a young singer-songwriter from Caracas named Heyleen Williams. Heyleen is twenty-four, a talented prolific songwriter; I think we will all be hearing about her in the future. With the blessing of Saborit’s family, she took the original lyrics and transformed them into a contemporary song with her original music and sung in her own voice. We also have an original opening track by the Cuban hip-hop duo Obsesión, and compositions by one of the best young jazz pianists in Cuba, Aldo López-Gavilán. We used a track by Dutch composer Adrian Elissen, performed by Bayuba Canté, a largely Cuban world music group based in Amsterdam. The music was a very important part of putting the story together. The women talk about this experience with much immediacy, but I was concerned with how a story from so many years ago would feel relevant to young people today, so I sought out a contemporary musical score of dynamic, upbeat compositions. The music is a huge persona within the film and pushes the pace of the editing. You go on a musical journey as a parallel experience to the story itself.

MJM: It is a journey I really enjoyed. And I know, Catherine, you recently returned from Cuba. Are you working on a new project? Are you continuing interviews with past brigadistas?

CM: Well, I teach about Cuba, and was recently there with twenty of my students. And I have ongoing research related to the Campaign, which includes continued research with archival documents and photographic images, and collecting of testimonies. I recently came across a brigadista’s diary from the Campaign, which is a treasure. I hope to eventually publish an oral history archive with all the testimonies of men and women literacy teachers and students. I will include testimonies from people living on and off the island. Thousands of former teachers now live in Miami, for example. My plan is to house one copy of this digital archive at the Literacy Museum in Havana and another at a university repository in the United States. I will probably conduct twenty to thirty more interviews before publishing the archive.

MJM: Wow, it seems like you are well on your way to successfully meeting that goal. I think it is clear from watching the film, just considering the nine women interviewed, that all races formed part of the brigadas. But, thinking about and keeping in mind—and I know you were just recently in Cuba when this drama unfolded—the caso Zurbano, what ways did you or did you not encounter racism in Cuba during the creation of your film? Or rather, what is your take, as a Cuban scholar, on the issue?
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CM: Thank you for that question—a very important one. Cuba is of a multi-racial society, and very much a country of the African diaspora. A majority Cubans on the island are Black and mulato. But the division of wealth and resources, like all post-slave societies in the Americas, is highly connected to the history of slavery. Many families in the region that enjoy the greatest resources, have wealth that was generated during the period of slavery (profits made from the unpaid labor of slaves). Likewise, those who were enslaved, because the wealth generated by their labor was taken from them, were impeded from accumulating wealth, and from passing it on to their children and grandchildren. This economic discrepancy determined what kind of housing, education, et cetera. families were able to afford, which in turn, largely determined access to political connections and social/cultural capital.

These disparities were among the main issues that the 1959 Revolution sought to address, and dramatically reduced disparities in the 1959 to 1989 period. The policies of the Revolution made health care and education free, and redistributed land and urban housing stock. They dismantled the main economic underpinnings of institutionalized racism and believed that in doing so, the other vestiges of racism would naturally fall away. They made enormous headway in a short period of time, proving to the rest of the world what was possible. In fact, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, the first country he visited was Cuba. He thanked Cuba for supporting African liberation struggles and said that Cuba had done more to eliminate institutionalized racism than any other country on earth.

But the legacy of the class-color dynamic is deeply entrenched in the region and Cuba is no exception. Racism is deep and pernicious and persists in many less obvious ways. Cuban race scholars continued to speak about the continuation of negative stereotypes and racial prejudices.

Now in the post-Soviet period, and with the new economic changes underway, Cuba is seeing that the growing economic divide also plays out along racial lines. Darker-skinned Cubans—cubanos negros y mulatos—have a greater understanding and experience of race and are more likely see the growing divide, whereas many lighter-skinned Cubans don’t see it. And this itself is part of the problem.

So, there is a renewed debate and dialogue about race and racism in Cuba. Cuban race scholars came together in September of 2012 to form the Cuban chapter of ARAC—La Articulación Regional de Afrodescendientes de Latinoamérica y el Caribe—in which Roberto Zurbano has been a key figure. Many others are involved: Tomás Fernández Robaina, Gisela Arandia, Esteban Morales, Norma Guillard, Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez of Obsesión, and others. These scholars, artists and
activists, including Zurbano, have been writing about race issues in Cuba for years, and are now coming together more formally to work together.

Zurbano’s essay that was published in The New York Times was very much the same discourse that he had been publishing and speaking about in Cuba for years. But the Times made some edits in the translation and chose their own title “For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn’t Begun,” which made some people in Cuba defensive. But clearly another element in the upset is the denial of the race problem itself.

ARAC took a stand to defend Zurbano, his right to talk about the issue openly and to publish his scholarship in any forum that he wishes. Many key people are standing behind him.

I think it is hard—deeply painful in some cases—for some people in Cuba to consider that racial disparities are on the rise. They have a strong core belief in Marti’s vision of a nation for all, and if Marti’s vision has not been fulfilled, if race inequality is an unsolved problem, it’s very painful for them to face, after decades of thinking they had solved it. But there is growing dialogue and increasing numbers of people—and institutions—are looking the issue in the face and proposing solutions.

**MJM:** How does your film approach race and/or racism?

**CM:** It was very important to me that the interviewees reflect the multi-raciality of Cuba. And to show the enormous Black and Brown participation in the Campaign, which is so evident in the archival photos of the young teachers. I see this story as a testament to the liberatory tradition in Cuba and as evidence of the multi-racial effort to build a new social order after the 1950s. That dream of a better world is still very much alive in Cuba. It takes constant, diligent work, and many Cubans are giving their lives to carry that on.

**MJM:** Catherine, thank you so much for your time. It has been a pleasure speaking with you.

Notes

1 Taped Interview. Nashville: April 25, 2013. While revisions were made to update some information and fill gaps not audible in the recording, the transcription represents Murphy’s original verbal responses. It also reflects Murphy’s review of the interview after the original transcription.

2 MAESTRA will be released on DVD by Women Make Movies. For more information: orders@wmm.com.