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Black and Cuban-American: Bias in 2 Worlds

By MIREYA NAVARRO

When black and Hispanic residents in this racially polarized city fought over a vacant City Commission seat, Henry Crespo stepped in and offered himself as the solution.

Being both black and Cuban, and a Spanish-speaker who lives in a black neighborhood, Mr. Crespo said he could bridge their worlds. But blacks said they would only accept a "black American" and Cubans regarded him as an oddity with questionable allure.

Mr. Crespo was not appointed to the commission; the seat went to an African-American woman.

"I'm as black as you can get but I'm Cuban," Mr. Crespo, 33, said recently, while on his job as housing director of the small city of Opa-Locka, near Miami, where he lives. "I have to be myself, understanding that I can't please everybody."

As black and Hispanic, Mr. Crespo is part of two worlds he says he relishes equally. But as African-Americans and Hispanic Americans wrestle for political influence here and the Hispanic majority increases, what Mr. Crespo sees as an advantage, indeed a rich example of multiculturalism, can also be a liability.

Black Cuban-Americans find themselves in a bind. As Cubans they belong to an immigrant group that has enjoyed tremendous economic and political success. But as blacks they have experienced the discrimination and hardships of African-Americans.

And they remain virtually invisible in the Miami power structure -- there are no black Cuban-American elected officials, no leaders of a major exile group and no major academic studies documenting their migration -- even though they are more representative of an island where half or more of the population is now estimated to be black and mulatto.

"People think I'm Dominican," said Alexis Barcelay, 25, a black boxer who left Cuba by going to the American naval base on Guantanamo Bay three years ago. "I have to tell them that there are blacks in Cuba, too."

Part of their invisibility is the result of their small numbers. The 1990 census found that fewer than 30,000 of nearly one million Hispanic residents in Dade County, or 3 percent, were black, most of them Cubans, with some Dominicans and Puerto Ricans. Nationwide, black Hispanic residents were also 3 percent of all Hispanic residents, the census showed.

Sociologists here say one reason that whites have overwhelmingly predominated in the exodus from revolutionary Cuba in the last 38 years is that the first waves of immigrants consisted mainly of the white elite who then sponsored relatives into the United States. And many blacks stayed behind longer because they had supported a revolution that provided social gains, opening educational and professional opportunities previously denied them, even if it had not extended equally to leadership positions in government.

But black Cubans say Cuba's Government has also hampered their migration through propaganda that paints the United States society as violently racist and by portraying those who want to leave as not only traitors but ingrates.

Cuba's dismal economic problems have compelled more blacks to leave in recent years, experts on Cuban affairs say, although information on the demographics of the most recent waves of immigrants is scarce. The Immigration and Naturalization Service, for instance, says it keeps no racial breakdown of the estimated 20,000 Cubans allowed to immigrate legally into this country each year.

But even more crucial than numbers in determining influence for black Cubans here has been their inability to fully integrate into either the black or Hispanic worlds, which requires them to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers among blacks and racism among white Hispanic residents.

Studies by a geography professor at the University of Miami, Thomas D. Boswell, show that the median income of black Hispanic residents of Dade County lagged behind that of white Hispanic residents -- \$8,000 to \$11,100 -- although the disparity was less than that between non-Hispanic whites and blacks. And his analysis of the 1990 census found the largest concentrations of black Hispanic Miamians in neighborhoods like Allapattah, sandwiched between Hispanic Little Havana and black Liberty City.

The predicament afflicts parents like Emmanuel and Luz Mery Angarica, a black Cuban and a white Colombian, who say they are rearing their 6-year-old son as "American," with no racial or ethnic labels, after two older sons suffered confusion and harassment from schoolmates over choosing an ethnic identity. "We never said anything but there was pressure from the other children to join their

band," Mrs. Angarica, 47, said. "One of them came home from school and told me, 'Mommy, I am red.' Now we're going to be more careful."

The two older brothers chose black because African-Americans were in the majority at their school.

Black Cubans like Carlos Moore, 53, are not torn about their ethnic identity. In 1986, when Mr. Moore was a professor at Florida International University, he came under harsh attack on Spanish-language radio and received death threats for focusing on racial issues and portraying revered white Cuban patriots as racists in a course at the university. He said the harassment forced him to leave Miami in 1987.

Mr. Moore, now a professor of international relations at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad, said his experiences here convinced him that those like him should come out "against racism" and ally themselves with other blacks, both Hispanic and African-American.

The substantial number of blacks in Cuba are descendants of slaves brought to the island from Africa to work the sugar plantations, and blacks from other Caribbean islands who came after slavery to do the same work.

"I have everything in common with the American black," Mr. Moore said, "the history, slavery, being kicked by whites."

For Rosa Reed, 43, a manager for a pharmaceutical company who moved to the United States from Cuba when she was 5, a watershed moment came in 1990, when she said she was dismissed from a Cuban-American organization when she assumed the role of spokeswoman for one of its programs.

"I was told that when Americans saw a black person they saw crime and poverty and that for the benefit of the organization I couldn't be a spokesperson," Ms. Reed said. "It was so shocking."

Ms. Reed now writes a current affairs column for a black newspaper, The Miami Times, is engaged to an African-American and belongs to a group of black Cuban-Americans that is holding talks with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People intended to start a nationwide black Hispanic section. The group is rallying around domestic issues like sensitizing white Hispanic Americans to racial discrimination in employment and other forms of racism suffered by black Hispanic Americans.

But the group of black Cuban-Americans says it is also concerned about supporting blacks in Cuba, who they say suffer the island's economic hardships more acutely than whites because fewer can count on relatives here to send them money and basic necessities.

A poll of Cuban-Americans in Dade County this year by Florida International University and The Miami Herald indeed showed marked differences between black and white Cubans in attitudes toward Cuba, with more blacks favoring a dialogue with the Cuban Government to help bring about democracy and opposing continuing the American embargo of Cuba or military action to overthrow President Fidel Castro.

Because Hispanic populations are the product of different racial influences, for instance, racial self-definitions go beyond black and white. A Cuban regarded as black by American standards could be "moro," "indian" or "jabao" in Cuba, depending on skin color and hair texture, with the gradations making racial classifications more ambiguous.

Cubans like Manuel Elizondo, 38, a trainer on the Cuban Olympic boxing team who defected in 1994, said they find racism to be worse in this country.

"In Cuba, racism dictates who is a leader and who is not," Mr. Elizondo said. "Here, because private property is allowed, the racism is determined by money. There are more class differences."

But ethnicity has a stronger pull than race in his new country, which has forced two new identities on him: black (in Cuba he was considered mulatto or Indian) and Hispanic.

"I'm Cuban and I speak Spanish," Mr. Elizondo said. "I am who I am, and I live in my own world."

But those with political aspirations like Mr. Crespo, a Manhattan native, have no such luxury. The sharpest criticism against Mr. Crespo when he sought a City Commission seat vacated by a Hispanic lawyer facing criminal charges, who himself had replaced a black commissioner who is in prison on a bribery conviction, came from black civic and political leaders. The loss of the commission's only black left the panel with four Hispanic members and one white one.

"It worked against him by the fact that he tossed the word Cuban out there," said one of the critics, the Rev. Willie E. Sims Jr., assistant director of the Dade County office of black affairs. "When things get hot, people go back to those they're comfortable with."

Mr. Crespo, in a response in The Miami Times to his critics, insisted on claiming ownership of two cultures.

"What may I ask you authenticates one's blackness?," he wrote in a letter to the editor. "Is it that tired age-old debate of skin color? If

so, I'm chocolate brown. Is it if one's ancestors were slaves? If so, my great-grandfather was born a slave. Is it if one's family knows the suffering and humiliation of segregation? If so, my mother was forced off the bus in 1959.

"But really, is not this whole discussion silly?"

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