

PICHÓN

A Memoir

Race and Revolution in Castro's Cuba

PRECIS

By Margaret BUSBY¹

Pichón is a rare kind of book: a remarkable true story that is at once “a good read”, engaging and unpredictable as the best fiction, and at the same time a compelling first-hand account of some of the most pivotal moments of twentieth-century politics. Carlos Moore, a now well known black Cuban ethnologist and activist, writes with absolute honesty, humor and often startling intimacy about the personal, social and historical episodes that have shaped him and taken him on an almost incredible life journey. Dealing with universal questions of identity and belonging in a way that is constantly uplifting, *Pichón* speaks poignantly of that unique state of estrangement - from one's own land, from others, and ultimately from oneself

Born in Cuba in 1942, of English-speaking West Indian parentage - qualifying him to be tagged a *pichón*, the ultra-derogatory term for foreign Blacks - Moore describes in vivid detail a poverty-stricken childhood steeped in social exclusion, racial self-hatred and maternal abuse, yet not without unexpected shafts of pleasure, inspiration and enlightenment. The Cuba of Moore's youth is an incontrovertibly racist society of the old plantation type, against which he rebels from an early age.

He is ten when Cuba enters the period of chaos and bloody conflict that marked the inglorious demise of the Batista regime and the rise of a new volcanic leader: Fidel Castro. When in 1958, at the height of the civil war between Castro and dictator Batista, Carlos leaves the island with his father and two of his five siblings to live in the United States of America, he truly believes he has reached a promised land that represents everything lacking in the small rural sugar-mill town he had known since birth.

In America, the teenaged Carlos faces new and sometimes dangerous challenges. *Pichón* chronicles the development of his political consciousness, indelibly shaped by ideas of the Left as well as by the US Civil Rights movement and the decolonization of Africa in the early 1960s, but most significantly by the

¹ **Margareth BUSBY**, writer and publisher. Author of **Daughters of Africa** (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992).

² Extremely offensive, derogatory term used by Cubans, Black and White, to designate the offspring of Haitians and West Indian Blacks. The term itself literally means: fledglings (offspring) of “Black buzzards.”

timely mentorship of a host of black radicals, such as the writer/performer Maya Angelou and the musicians Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln.

As his black consciousness grows, he becomes an activist and Harlem street-corner speaker. In particular, his support for the Congo and Patrice Lumumba lead him to participate in a daring but doomed plot to secure the African leader's release from prison by targeting the Belgian Mission to the United Nations. For the next quarter-century, he would be on the FBI list of foreigners considered a threat to America's national security.

His return to Cuba in 1961 is fraught with disappointment, as the fact soon dawned on him that skin color still determines one's treatment in revolutionary Cuba. His quest to make his misgivings known at the highest level, naming officials guilty of racism and discrimination, leads to three weeks' imprisonment as a counter-revolutionary. Months later, after a face-to-face confrontation with Castro on the same issue, he is sent to a hard labor camp deep in the countryside, to be rehabilitated through work and re-education.

In November 1963, he takes refuge inside the embassy of the Republic of Guinea and leaves Cuba. Thus begins an exile that will last thirty-four years, spent in Europe (France), Africa, (Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal) and in the Caribbean (Martinique, Guadeloupe and Trinidad). Officially and permanently banished from his country, Carlos lives in constant fear for his life, harassed by the Cuban regime for speaking out against the misguided racial policies implemented by Castro's government (repression of the Afro-Cuban religious cults, banning of all social and political Black organizations, pitiless jailing and crushing of pro-Négritude scholars, intellectuals and Black dissenters). He depicts with frank self-awareness the hardship and resistance of an itinerant life cut from the cloth of exile – at home, abroad and within.

Carlos Moore's life bears witness to the world-shaking events that defined much of the second half of the twentieth century: the Cold War, the Cuban Revolution, the decolonization of Africa, the emergence of the Third World, lastly, the US Civil Rights and Black power struggles in the 60s, 70s and 80s. His life amounts to a personalized story of all these events, with the Cuban Revolution and the impact it had on the Black population occupying center-piece.

