

Angela Gilliam

My first trip to Cuba was in December 1980 as part of an excursion of anthropology students and some faculty from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. We were three generations that joined that group of students and teachers led by Johnnetta Cole--my father, my ten year old daughter, Onik'a, and I. Onik'a and Johnnetta's son, Che, were the only children accompanying our delegation, and in Santiago, Onik'a was given the red kerchief that was the emblem of the young Cuban Pioneers. One of my favorite pictures is one of my daughter with a bewildered look on her face, her red scarf making her almost indistinguishable from the Cuban children who surround her. One of those children was Esmilidia Perez, who had recited a stirring and emotional poem about her love for her country. The most heartfelt welcome our group received was in Caney as we got out of our tour bus and descended a steep hill and being met by dozens of small children, who offered us flowers and cheek kisses as they guided us to the reception and program organized by the Caney Committee for the Defense of the Revolution.

Right before that trip, Ronald Reagan had just won his first election for U.S. president, and his interventionist policies soon transformed the relationships among the peoples of the Caribbean and Central America. These policies also affected the process and outcomes of the landmark United Nations meeting of international women in Nairobi in July, 1985. It was by attending that conference that I met women like Carolina Aguilar and Marta Nunez of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), who later invited me to participate in a research group that compared and contrasted the conditions of women in the western hemisphere. As a result, I visited Cuba about two or three times in the eighties—this time without family—to attend working meetings. The laws governing US citizens traveling to Cuba had become really strict by that time. Once in Cuba, one could not spend a cent. There was a special store for foreigners called a *diplo tienda* (diplo-store). As a result, I stayed in the Vedado guest house of the FMC, and ate all meals there. The FMC workshop of 1985 was especially memorable. The FMC had elected to take advantage of the Second Encounter of Intellectuals for the Sovereignty of the Peoples of Our America, and invite women from several countries in the Americas to attend. Along with about 200 other people invited to the Encounter, we were all invited to a wonderful reception in the Palacio de la Revolución, hosted by Fidel Castro, who shook everybody's hand. And with each trip, more and more I came to see Esmilidia and her mother as part of my own adoptive family.

And now, I have traveled three times with Cindy Domingo and the US Women and Cuba Collaboration. My adoptive Cuban daughter, Esmilidia, has two children of her own, and her daughter is named after my daughter Onik'a and me (Onika Alegna—Angela spelled backwards). Cuba has embarked on a big project to perfect socialism in original ways. One of the most important is to share their medical expertise to all who need it, whether by training physicians who commit to serving the under-served, or inventing badly needed preventive and curative medication. The world has come to appreciate the efforts of this small country to leave a positive heritage for the next generations to emulate.