



Year 2, No. 6, September 2015

Manuel Cuesta Morú, *Mature Deliberative Democracy* / José Hugo Fernández, *Anti-Racism in the Twilight of the Revolution* / Armando Chaguaceda y Marlene Azor, *The Race Debate and the Lefts: Consensuses and Dissonances* / Yusimí Rodríguez, *Waiting for Housing* / Omer Freixa, *Rethinking Negritude in Argentina Through its Historic Moments* / Carlos César Lamadrid, César Omar Lamadrid y Norberto Pablo Cirio, *First Self-Managed Census of Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin* / Verónica Vega, *Cuba: Reasons for a Non-Identity*/ David Escalona Carrillo (David D'Omni), *Trinity of Art*/ Yania Suarez, *Necessary Art: Amaury Pacheco Speaks to Us about his post-OMNI*/ Enrique Del Risco, *The Secret Rumba* / Bonita Lee Penn, *A Riot is the Language of the Unheard*



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# IDENTIDADES



*IDENTIDADES* is a publication of the *Plataforma de Integración Cubana* [Platform for Cuban Integration], a non-profit, non-partisan organization whose goal is to advocate for the rights of Afro-descendants and other alternative groups in Cuba, promote their empowerment as citizens and support their active role in political reform via the practice of Deliberative Democracy, and also contribute to the recovery of the history of their participation in the creation and development of the Cuban nation and its culture.

It aspires to discuss the difficulties faced by Afro-descendants and all discriminated people in today's Cuba, and propose actions for confronting the problem and facilitating communication about it worldwide.

It is open to people anywhere in the world interested in the topic who can offer their experiences and discuss a subject so important for Cuba and all other countries that received the African Diaspora, or where minorities are discriminated by those in power.

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*Manrique. Oleo sobre tela, serie Querida Habana, 2012*

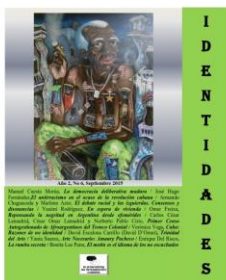
*Plataforma de Integración*

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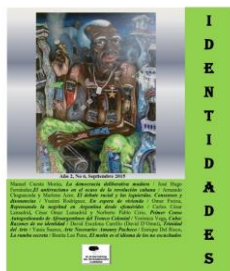
ISSN: 2373-151



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 Habana, 2012



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serie *Querida*  
Habana, 2012

The sixth issue of *IDENTIDADES* comes out after our working sessions in San Juan, Puerto Rico, which took place at the same time as the 2015 LASA conference. They became a wonderful space for analyzing and dialoguing about the multiple activities planned and executed by members of Cuba's independent civil society. The *Plataforma de Integración Cubana* devotes much attention to them and offers them support.



The Workshop on Theory and Practice of Deliberative Democracy held on May 28<sup>th</sup> reveals the strength that this basic concept is gaining in Cuba little by little. This is what Manuel Cuesta Morúa's article "**Mature Deliberative Democracy**" demonstrated. This concept is essential to democratic practice among Cubans. Even more satisfying was the fact that we were able to hold this event in the main assembly hall of the Center for Advanced Studies of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, with collaboration from archeologist Dr. Miguel Rodríguez López, the institution's Rector. The session went on for two hours, looking a deliberative democracy from multiple angles, and its potential for developing democratic processes in very different socio-political contexts.

Our narrative chronicles some of the evening's essential interventions. Thus, the presentation by Professor Robert Cavalier, Director of the Carnegie Mellon University Program for Deliberative Democracy, insisted on the points necessary to build a democratic process and offered examples of how that process is being employed in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where it has highlighted citizen viewpoints, professionalism, and the importance of establishing a well structured environment and background information. It has been a process in which participants have the possibility of reflecting, nurturing respect and tolerance for other's opinions, as well as a civic culture that seeks consensus. Valeriano Ramos, Director of Strategic Alliances and Equity Officer for EveryDay Democracy, offered examples of "organization and the effort that is being made to involved communities in the process of democratic deliberation and action for change. He stressed the importance of there being a result after a dialogue." And, Ambassador Martin Palous, Director of the Vaclav Havel Initiative at Florida International University (FIU) offered his experiences based upon the historic events that took place in Czechoslovakia, to highlight the importance of the deliberative process before and after the transition to democracy. On the Cuban side, Juan Antonio Madrazo, National Coordinator for the *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration*, made reference to the fact that deliberative democracy is at work in Cuba as a tool for generating pluralistic participation among citizens, and has become an attractive concept for people to return cordially to political activity. Cuesta Morúa emphasized that this consensual practice is very needed among Cubans in their search for a new model, that it acts as a mechanism for working towards democracy and leads to a

common base upon which we can identify ourselves that has specific rules for work and coexistence. Upon illustrating how this is being done in Cuba, he explained: “This is how we started the process of having Constitutional Roundtables all throughout the country. That way, we have been managing to get citizens to participate in a conversation about laws and the Constitution, so that can start developing a civic culture, just one of the so many civic virtues that we must strengthen: tolerance from within the citizens’ diversity.” This is a new phase that is being put into practice via Tables for Democratic Unity of Action (MUAD), since after Cuba and the United States reestablished diplomatic relations, the conversation regarding Cuba’s democratization has taken on a new level and dimension. This reestablishment is exactly what the article by Marifeli Pérez-Stable, **“My Return to Cuba...”** discusses. She attended the flag raising ceremony at the U.S. Embassy in Cuba by invitation, discusses the significance of this diplomatic rapprochement between the two governments, and the need for it to impact positively on Cuba’s population and real democratic changes. Another important moment for the group that traveled to San Juan was the panel **“Racism and Reason: Movement, Media, Debate and Legality,”** which focused on the issue of race in Cuba and Puerto Rico from diverging viewpoints. Its goal was to give a panoramic idea of the challenges faced by anti-racist movements in the Caribbean, and of how to analyze the ways in which social and political activism on the issue of race could strengthen social justice. The presentation **“Anti-Racism at the Twilight of the Cuban Revolution,”** by José Hugo Fernández, delves into the avatars of the independent anti-racist movement and the effort being put out by those in power to create disunity regarding the problem’s causes and possible solutions. Even

new concepts have been created to establish differences and support fragmentation, boycott debate, and promote discord. One of the terms is “leftist anti-racist fighter,” another euphemism which some call themselves, since the term ‘revolutionary’ serves as a safeguard from those in political power. This distinguishes them from “other” anti-racists who have to carry out their activism under difficult circumstances, under constant harassment by the State’s repressive forces. The same could be said about similar work being carried out internationally, quite successfully, in some cases. Regarding the group of Cubans and Puerto Ricans at the recent LASA conference, José Hugo Fernández himself wrote **“LASA and the Cuban Regime: An Undesired Invasion.”** It is a rightful indictment of how this group was “treated like a solitary minority, with a lack of deference.” This and many other irregularities and difficulties were faced by members of that group who came to be LASA panelists, and make one doubt that these circumstances can be attributed only to chance. In **“The Race Debate and the Lefts: Consensuses and Dissonances,”** Armando Chaguaceda and Marlene Azor offer an interesting but possibly risky classification, given there are frequent contradictions in the groups they define, particularly in the contexts in which judgments are made. The authors identify different positions attributed to the left regarding the race problem in Cuba. They highlight how “the axis that reveals dissonances has to do with the possibility of Afro-descendants organizing themselves, and public demands for dealing with the problem.” The demonizing of positions contrary to the Revolution and socialism affect the anti-racist fighters who escape the frameworks imposed on them by the government, in its desire to continue monopolizing any treatment of the problem.

The authors speak to us about *the organic left, alternative left, and oppositionist left*, and emphasize the contrasts between both extremes. Various articles offer our readers concrete examples of the immense problems affecting the Cuban population. **“Waiting on Housing,”** by Yusimí Rodríguez, talks about how difficult it is to argue, explain, and show a reality that is always hidden or twisted via all the media, especially to people who visit Cuba. This is particularly egregious because if one walks with said visitors in Old Havana’s tourist areas, it is filled with picture-postcard hotels and buildings. In one article, we are offered the example of a tourist who asked to be taken to the other side of the bay, to Regla. This tourist was able to experience Regla’s crude reality in its full glory, when he visited one of so many housing units where multiple families, mostly black and mestizo ones that have not managed to or have lost their housing, live in incredibly crowded conditions. Their living spaces reflect unhealthiness, evictions, and environments prone to illnesses, as well as the crudest of shortcomings and wants. These are realities that “cannot wait for the freedom of the press, expression, and association to exist in Cuba...for these people to be able to escape the precarious conditions in which they live. In **“A Life With No Assurances,”** Natividad Soto walks us through the daily vicissitudes of everyday citizens, realities that constantly contradict lofty, “Revolutionary” propaganda, and reflect the imposition of a dual morality, due to their need to elude consequences that could result in open opposition and a demanding of rights. The article **“Reflections of a Cuban Teacher”** offers us brief by heartfelt observations by a woman who after 55 years of teaching talks to us about many points that reveal the failure of social programs, the crisis facing Cuba’s educational system today, and the consequences, which

affect not only the shaping of generations of future Cubans, but also of educators, too.

In such conditions, Cubans invent and endure the most incredibly unpleasant circumstances in order to survive. In **“The New Mavericks,”** Armando Soler covers certain problems in their extension all though the country: how to find a space for survival in an environment that thwarts and tries to stymie each and every way one might find to eek out a living his or her own way, and for their families. Increasing needs, shortages, and poorly paid work have led people to find independent means for survival that skirt rigid, official control. Only creativity, professional skill, and audacity serve as substitutes for many economic fugitives from a system that opposes all creative initiative, even while it does not satisfy people’s needs. These new alternatives now even include ways of dealing with Cuba’s poor digital infrastructure and new technologies. The brief testimonies by Rudicel Batista and Leonardo Hernández, in **“A View of Manzanillo”** and **“The Twelfth Biennale in Havana,”** respectively, are also quite illustrative, by contrast. If they do indeed reveal to the world and tourists the many places that have been restored or “cosmetically made up,” particularly in the capital, its poverty stricken counterpart can also be seen. Batista submerges us in the meteoric deterioration of the historical city of Manzanillo, and Hernández, takes us to the unusual celebration of Havana’s Biennale, to make us reflect upon and compare the sumptuous environment that was created in an extremely delimited space with the decadent rest of the city: the worse living conditions, building collapses and their victims, the lack of housing, and the overcrowding that are our daily bread. Images don’t lie. The contrast between the skating rink and the simulated beach on the Malecón, with the deterioration across the street in one

of the historically emblematic areas of the capital, reaffirms that the truth cannot be hidden. The article **“Cuba: Reasons for a Non-Identity,”** by Verónica Vega, delves precisely into this panorama and its consequences for feelings of national identification. She points out how difficult it is, particularly for young people, “to transmit a pride that has nothing to do with the imposed patriotism against which generations of Cubans have reacted and react with rage, demystification, or apathy.” This is about a context that overwhelms citizens, due to the excess of arbitrary measures to which they are subjects, and the disdain there is for their rights. All this ends up choking any sense of belonging to the nation. Yet, it is encouraging that what one sees upon first glance has not yet definitively shaped the deepest part of the pride there is in being Cuban. There are people who engage in the alternative arts, who use all their talents to nurture what David D’Omni calls in his article the **“Trinity of Art,”** which is “grandiose, total, and powerful, when it is born of an honest cry of the soul, and does not fake, does not fear, and overwhelms with its rare majesty; it is a banal void and sterile when it does fake, fear, and does not overwhelm.” Among the creators of this sort of art is **Amaury Pacheco**, who talks to us about his trajectory as an artist in the interview with him Yania Suárez did for this issue. He talks about his recently created philosophy of art, “Necessary Art,” and its perspectives and possibilities for satisfying needs: “An art in which the poetic operates without any pre-established aesthetic norms, which makes the artistic endeavor a satisfier of needs or converts the satisfier into an artistic endeavor.” That position is alien to the Cuban State’s rigid aesthetic ideology, and José Clemente Gascón examines it in his article **“The Influence of Religious Systems and Afro-Cuban Cultural Practices on**

**Contemporary Cuban Art.”** When measures are used against intellectuals and artists, for political, ideological, or moral reasons, the consequences are terrible, as Gascón shows through the creators who chose for his article. Since what is born of the people can take root in any environment or spaces, as long as the seed and new growth have the devoted attention of its growers, **“The Secret ,”** by Enrique del Risco, submerges us into a very Cuban musical, poetic, and dance tradition being cultivated in New York neighborhoods, both on a personal level, in an artistic and popular context created by Cubans and Puerto Ricans. The same can be said of Arístedes Falcón’s documentary, “clave blen blen,” which captures this environment, and reveals to us “the complex process of taking root in a large city [and explores] its musical dimensions but also reviews the historical, social, ethnic, national, racial, and religious” aspects, to offer us a vivid testimony. In the section Tributes, Leonardo Calvo talks to us in **“Bicentennial of Mariana Grajales”** about the significance and transcendence of Mariana Grajales, a paradigm of an Afro-descendant woman of humble origins who contributed mightily to the creation of the Cuban nation. The tribute is in the context of the Mariana Grajales Bicentennial and highlights the lack of ignorance and omission with which Afro-descendants are often treated in order to hide their place and participation in the formation and development of Cuba. This issue of invisibilizing, invisibility, and ignorance is also dealt with deeply, as is racial violence in other latitudes, in the articles by Omer Freixa, Norberto Pablo Cirio, Bonita Lee Penn, Angie Edell and Jorge Rafael Ramírez. In **“Rethinking Negritude in Argentina,”** Freixa begins by discussing different national anniversaries to show how Afro-descendants have been eliminated from the register of historical memory. From this



Southern Cone country's first moments, the racism of the ruling classes and the presumption of national whitening led to a "forgetting" of the participation of blacks in important national events, and lead to oblivion or ignorance on national holidays in which their actions were actually relevant. Freixa also points out how on national censuses blacks and mulattoes slowly went from being numerically important to a minority, only to become a memory of the past, finally. This is supported by anthropologist Norberto Pablo Cirio's illustrative article "**First Self-Administered Census of Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin.**" It explores censuses from 1778 to now, to reveal how they have created a Europeanized nation since the earliest versions. He explores this position and tendency going back to the Second National Census (1895) in the chapter "Black Race," in which racial problems are not only denied, but the imminent disappearance of slave descendants and the formation of "a new and beautiful white race" reaffirmed." Thus, the importance of the Misibamba Organization's initiative: the first Self-Administered Census of Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin, whose results revealed the fallacies of the 2010, official census, among other things, like the continued invisibilization or denial of this population, and the fact that it was and has a right to be part of the Argentine nation and its culture. The paper by young "Ashanti" Edell and Ramírez situate the subordinate position of Peruvian Afro-descendants. While they acknowledge some of the policy advances made by the State with regard to this population—about 8% of the country's total population—they insist on the need to activate projects that deal with the struggle for acknowledgement and inclusionary development as a way to deal with racism and discrimination. Ashanti Perú engages in just this kind of sustained effort. Bonita Lee Penn

bring us the drama of racial violence in the United States, by discussing the consequence of a rash of fatal victims from the African-American community at the hands of the police, and the unsustainable arguments that are being used to justify the situation. She goes into detail about how the media don't pay appropriate attention to these moving events, and how propaganda often repeats facts that have been twisted, stating: "This cannot be the norm, because it is not normal for human beings to live and treat each other this way." She reflects: "This is my home, my America? Why is it so difficult for people to understand how we feel when we are treated as if we were less than other human beings?" Lastly, we are including in this issue presentations about the first five issues of *IDENTIDADES* by José Hugo Fernández and Manuel Cuesta Morúa at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. These collaborators' commentaries and the way in which they discuss the journal's impact in Cuba are valuable encouragement for us to continue this work.

**Dr. Juan Antonio Alvarado Ramos**  
**Editor-in-Chief**

# *Mature Deliberative Democracy*

Manuel Cuesta Morúa

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Havana, Cuba

The deliberative democracy workshop a group of organizations from both inside and outside Cuba held, with Professor Robert Cavalier (Program for Deliberative Democracy, Carnegie Mellon University) and sponsored by the Platform for Cuban Integration, ended up revealing the maturity the fundamental concept of democracy is attaining among Cubans. With more than 40 invited participants at an important, Puerto Rican institution, the Center for Advanced Studies, an interesting

conversation ensued after the informative presentations by Juan Antonio Madrazo Luna (Coordinator, *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration*); Professor Cavalier; ex-Czech Ambassador and Charter 77 Member Martin Palous; Valeriano Ramos (EveryDay Democracy, U.S.); Professor Marifeli Pérez-Stable (Florida International University); and Manuel Cuesta Morúa (*Progressive Arc Party* and Coordinator, *Nuevo País Platform*). Also present was democratic Florida State Representative José Javier Rodríguez.



*Opening the workshop. From left to right, Juan Antonio Alvarado, Manuel Cuesta Morua, Robert Cavalier and Juan Antonio Madrazo*

After President of the Platform for Cuban Integration, Juan Antonio Alvarado, gave the welcome and presented the speakers, it was Madrazo Luna's turn to discuss his experiences with workshops he coordinates and offers all throughout Cuba, and how deliberative democracy is an incredible tool for generating diverse participation from hundreds of citizens, and also constitutes an attractive concept that gets them to return to politics in a way they find pleasant and engaging. His experience shows that the level of political disaffection among Cuban citizens requires a model and methods of participation that attract and do not distance people from the building of the country's future. Thus, deliberative democracy is useful in civil society to achieve a conversation about diverse and intersecting interests, and to create the horizontality necessary to strengthen the abilities and talents of all civic actors when constructing diverse projects. Madrazo Luna emphasizes the importance of knowledge sharing, both for acting efficiently in the complex and diverse scenarios that a lot of information brings about, as well as for influencing realities that are difficult or resistant to change. In this way, deliberative democracy coincides with the sharing of knowledge when it demands informed citizens able to argue and make decisions that are based in reason. Professor Cavalier's presentation guided us regarding the practical nature of linking deliberative democracy and the Constitutional Initiative Tables that

have been taking place within the broader project of constitutional reform that the *Nuevo País Project* has been carrying out through its own efforts and with support from the Platform for Cuban Integration. His academic presentation highlighted the preparation needed for being able to rise step by step in the project of deliberative democracy by using a more far-reaching instrument, with global implications, if we are trying to bring about a fundamental and impactful constitutional reform. This instrument is deliberative surveys, which have been tried out both in the United States and the European Parliament; they demand a greater professionalization of the work of activists and the Constitutional Initiative Tables. A review of the virtues of deliberative democracy was another thing we were able to enjoy, thanks to Professor Cavalier's workshop. Of course, deliberative democracy is historically young with respect to all the other models of participatory democracy; it creates doubts regarding its reach and viability in societies like ours. Professor Cavalier illustrated how deliberative democracy was used to choose Pittsburgh Police Chief, explaining that citizens were involved in the process from the very beginning, so that the selection took into account two criteria: the perspective of citizens and the need for professional expertise. His presentation was very rich, indeed, because it abounded in the conceptual details that make up deliberative democracy, and are important enough to

share. In deliberative democracy, conversations must take place within a very well structured environment. For this to happen there is a protocol that begins with a population sample; this population receives background information and get together in small groups of 6-7 persons and a trained moderator. In general, what happens is that the people at these tables are permitted to ask a resource panel or panel of experts questions. These experts answer the different tables' questions, then the table participants are given time to reflect on the day's conversation. At the end, they fill out a survey about that information. This is how a well-structured and informative conversation is produced. These conversations are held regularly among people who normally don't speak to each other and produce additional benefits for political debate, in general. Let's just say that people begin to develop respect and tolerance for other opinions, and cultivate a civic culture: the type of civil virtue or civil society that has been absent from many of the new democracies that simply received a liberal constitution without having a civic base. The practice of deliberative democracy not only produces better-informed opinions, but also cultivates a sense of civic virtue amongst people. This reminds us that democracy must be received into people's lives. Yet, deliberative democracy is also a professional skill and set of rules. It uses a basic model, a deliberative poll. A poll is taken prior to any discussion in order

to know what the position of those polled is, what information they have and how they live. Then these people, who must be well prepared, are given a background document about the particularly issue that will be discussed; it must present varied perspectives regarding the same issue. They are put together into small groups with trained moderators; the members often share life stories. It is amazing to see how some able to enter the lives of others in so uncomplicated a manner. The last 10 minutes of this conversation are used to arrive at a consensus about two questions that are handed over to the panel of experts whose members are chosen from among people who have practical knowledge and expertise on the subject. They serve as teachers. Deliberation is quite different from debate. If it is important to have debate skills, as citizens it is more important to be able to deliberate. One must listen carefully and be willing to work to solve a problem. The deliberative democracy model works better when a subject is not being debated, but rather when people are working, when we roll up our sleeves and try to solve a specific problem. And it works. The Pittsburgh Mayor's office has accepted this model as a way to achieve consensus amongst the population. Deliberative forums should be tied to a result, an action, so they can influence policy and decisions. In its purest form, a deliberative poll has only the power to advise. If a particular idea achieves a super majority, then the

government, or whoever, takes the result seriously, without it being a referendum. This is another necessary step for the creation of policy. It is effective, although it would be easy for a politician to say, “I don’t pay attention to polls. But it would be harder for him or her to stay ‘I don’t listen to the people, to the citizens,” when these same people had the chance to engage in an informed conversation amongst themselves and experts. In this situation, if a politician does not agree, he or she must provide good reasons. In other words, politicians cannot just simply indicate something; they must demonstrate something. This elevates the level of the political debate and the quality of policies. Cavalier finished his presentation by making an important distinction we should heed in the Cuban case. He distinguished deliberation and activism: each one has its own, particular role. The activist wants an agenda, and to promote it; the deliberative forum’s goal is to try to solve a problem. This is a basic distinction, because it is not ideological. It removes ideology from the places it is forcefully introduced and leads to a deliberative problem in more than a few cases: the dominion of individuals with preferences over citizens with wisdom. According to Cavalier, this deliberative dilemma is well studied *The Parties versus the People*, a book by a colleague of his, Mickey Edwards. Its subtitle is quite suggestive: “How the Republicans and Democrats become Americans Again.” Martin Palous’ presentation was critical and instructive. For him, authors

and promoters of deliberative democracy do not explain how to apply this model in totalitarian countries. Palous believes it is only possible after change occurs and went on to offer two examples from his own experiences in what was then Czechoslovakia. First came the Charter of 77, a moment in time when a group of people asked the government to initiate a dialogue about human rights. The answer was ‘no,’ but something began to happen amongst the citizenry. The silence was broken and certain public spaces were created. Those who were valiant enough, in the right or had motivation enough to enter these spaces did so, which thus began the dialogue during a revolutionary period, which later on had an enormous effect.



***Martin Palous***

On the other hand, a very important aspect of this pre-revolutionary situation was the international factor, since these debates involved Czech citizens—which the government didn’t listen to—and also the international community. We should recall that this was the precise

moment of the Helsinki process. All this is important for our Cuban friends to take into account. There are international processes and inter-State factors that are very relevant and affect the efficacy and result of these dialogues. Palous reminded us that lawyers from the Prague Law School, who were, of course, associated with the government, attempted quite seriously to use the classic argument that international accords only imply international obligations; that is, that articles and laws from other international communities could not be used as precedent for rights for Czechoslovak citizens. This was an extremely important point that had to be deliberated internationally and, according to Palous, current deliberations between the United States and Cuba, and Cuba and the European Union should include as much as possible this element of legitimacy that international law offers. The key here is to legitimate citizen participation and the possibility or efficacy of civil society's representatives. Palous' second point was on the post-revolutionary period and talked about an element that had an important influence when work on the new Czech Republic's constitution was going to be worked on. Normativists know the concept as that of a legal revolution. What this means is that there is discontinuity in the law. When there is legal order, the new law essentially takes power from the old one, which proves there is legal continuity. All laws are still in effect until they are replaced, but in a legal revolution this does not apply. A

transition must be defined. Czech constitutional tradition since 1918 said that all the Austro-Hungarian Empire's laws would continue to be in effect with the exception of those that were not compatible with the new republic. It took two years for the Czech constitution to be accepted. Then Palous took us all the way up to 1989, and asked us to take notice of what happened. "Did we have a legal revolution?" he asked. "If so, when? It was certainly when we had the Velvet Revolution in November 1989. During the first two days two very important actions were started: two articles were excised from the Constitution that had to do with the role of the Communist Party's leadership, and the rest of our legal order remained intact. We had free elections. More importantly, and the reason Palous said this was because it was only in January 1991 that the new parliament accepted the bill of rights, two years after the Velvet Revolution. That was the legal revolution, according to contemporary thought. This is when the discontinuity of laws occurred and a very important second chance for constitutional deliberation presented itself. A deliberative process was organized so that people themselves could offer details about administrative practices, and about all kinds of practices regarding the country's political and social aspects. That way, it would be possible to ask questions in public and eventually produce deliberative actions. Palous ended his presentation highlighting that the deliberative process

has a very important role both prior to a revolution and in the post-revolutionary period. Valeriano Ramos, Director of Strategic Alliances and Equity Officer at EveryDay Democracy, gave an excellent presentation via Skype. He talked about how his organization works, the fact that

he has been working on getting communities on board with deliberative democracy and action for change for many years now. This is known as Dialogue for Change because it places importance on there being a result after a dialogue.



*Valeriano Ramos*

Within the process itself, there is an emphasis on establishing relations among those who participate from the very beginning. For EveryDay Democracy, it is not about getting together a group of people who have not previously met each other or had shared experiences, and then bringing the process to a close after three or four hours of talking. They seek an integral and organizing process that can integrate different participants with diverse opinions through an equitable process that ensures that people who don't

normally form part of these dialogues and community conversations feel they are part of something important. They can also express their opinions, and then be able to make collective decisions with a positive impact for everyone and that benefits the whole community, generally, and not just a few people or minorities. Something basic: EveryDay Democracy emphasizes the importance of all people who can be impacted by the topic being discussed participate in the deliberative dialogue and divide the process into five stages: establishing

coalitions, organizing the community around a topic or problem to talk about, training facilitators for the dialogues (that some call 'moderators'), dialoguing, and starting and strengthening action. From the very beginning, attention is paid to the Equitable Lense, which means that attention is always paid to barriers, obstacles and conditions that have historically limited the participation of some marginalized groups: these are generally groups like African Americans, Latinos or Hispanics in the United States, as well as other groups, such as Native Americans, or communities that historically have been marginalized by political and social processes. The training of the facilitators is basic; different skills are taught them, like how to negotiate a conversation, how to stimulate a conversation in a positive manner, how to identify certain points of view that have not been taken into account, etc. All this is accomplished through a Discussion Guide. Dialogues should be well structured. It all starts with important rules that basically tell us that we must respect each other, value what others are saying, listen to what others are saying, not disrespect each other, allow ourselves time to reflect and assure ourselves that we are not disrespecting people. The dialogue takes place over five sessions. The dialogue circles are usually made up of 8-10 people from diverse communities, either from different ethno-racial groups, or for example, an Anglo-Saxon group and an

African American, Latino or indigenous one. This all depends on the communities. Two facilitators lead the groups. The participants should feel comfortable enough to share their points of view; cultural understanding must take place. After the five dialogue sessions, the action process begins. It has been taking shape since the fourth or fifth dialogue. That is how the Forum is structured in terms of Action, and the actions to be carried out are identified. Priorities are established, as not everything can be done at the same time. Then the Action Teams are established and results are evaluated. Cuesta Morúa talked about deliberative democracy as a non-political fiction. To begin with, it is a practice that involves the consensus so necessary amongst Cubans, as is the search for a new model that can concomitantly serve as a tool with which to work for democracy in the country. That way forward should follow the most general of paths, and seek a common base upon which all can identify themselves, and that can also neutralize another key point: our propensity for seeking historical importance and prominence. This is about defining 'what' before 'who.' It is about seeking the rules of the game, rules for coexistence. And a country's basic game rules have to do with laws and the constitution. This is where we identified a common point, and one that constitutes a weakness. It is common for all of us to share equally. Deliberative democracy is also anti-elite; it is a model that involves the people and makes them



feel they are participating in defining the future, which allows for taking political debate beyond ideologies. This model has to do with our ability to be citizens and does not measure our capacity for epic behavior. That's how we begin with groups espousing diverse ideologies. Deliberative democracy does not deny the past; it only fine-tunes democratic instruments, imbuing them with new qualities and elements. It opens up further to the citizenry, but does not contradict the basic

fundamentals of liberal democracy: the separation of powers, respect for basic freedoms, periodical elections for leaders, etc. There is no contradiction, but rather simply a strengthening of democratic debate. There is nothing better than to employ deliberative democracy for a debate about our constitution. The key lies in calling for the citizenry to participate in defining it, while taking into account what experts have to say about it, of course.





To involve the citizenry is important, because the 1940 Constitution, for example, did not guarantee either the nation's institutional continuity nor the future democracy, much less citizen participation. This is why and how we started the process of holding Constitutional Initiative Tables throughout the entire country, in an unremarkable, quiet way, bringing people together at folks' homes, in the community, because one of the things we want to guarantee is that they bring together community members. That way, we've been able to get citizens to participate in a conversation about laws and the constitution. This way they can begin to adopt a civic culture and one (perhaps the most important) of the many virtues we should strengthen: tolerance regarding the citizenry's diversity. This exercise in deliberative democracy is going to guarantee and is guaranteeing that people slowly adapt to the diversity of different opinions. We

are now going to enter our most visible stage, which is about showing them, and particularly the critics, that this has been possible in Cuba. When we began to distribute preliminary information, many people said it was not possible for people to be gathering at 300 and 400 homes at the same time because the regime would not allow it. We did it and we can prove it, which what is most important. We don't only have information about the fact we have brought together so many citizens all around Cuba, but we can also certify it, although not in all cases, unfortunately, because one needs material resources for that, but we can certify more than half the cases. The first thing that is going to happen with this process of becoming visible is that we want to show how it has been done and what has been done. The second step in this new phase is to better prepare those who are moving this process forward, because only a few of us have had the opportunity to read and

absorb what we need to read to do so. We should have clarity throughout this process, so we can move it forward. We have been able to empirically do much of this while taking advantage of a virtue-defect all Cuban have: we talk a lot and have opinions about everything. This is a virtue within deliberative democracy, but it must be structured. It must be a structured conversation for that virtue to result in a positive impact. At the same time, it really requires what is necessary: to control the time during which the conversation takes place and for us to open up and listen to others in a process of active listening that must be constructed little by little. Deliberative democracy is nothing more than a rationally structured conversation with active listening, and not a debate or argument to see who wins, as if it were an Olympic competition to see who has the best argument. No. It is about finding consensus. This is the new phase we want to put into practice: we will do so within the Unity of Democratic Action Table (MUAD) and, concretely, with the Otro 18 Project. Marifeli Pérez-Stable, a Professor of Socio-Cultural Global

Studies, closed the presentations by praising the Constitutional Initiative Tables' process and offering her thoughts about the differences in context between Cuba and the United States, where experience with deliberative democracy is quite advanced, given the U.S. has a structured society and strong civic culture. She believes the experience is valuable and sets forth that any change in Cuba should not be conceived of as revolutionary at its core and in its values. The event concluded with a rich discussion of differing points of view, doubts, and valuable commentaries from all the participants. In any case, once the United States and Cuba finally fully reestablish their diplomatic ties, the conversation about democratizing Cuba will take on new qualities and dimensions. In this context, our challenge will be to reinvent ourselves as a political model, imitate the past, or deepen citizens' participation as subjects of their own destiny, and the nation's common destiny: deliberative democracy becomes increasingly relevant to all this.



# *My Return to Cuba after 24 Years*

Marifeli Pérez-Stable

Professor, Florida International University

Cuban. Residing in the United States

After 24 years, I returned to Cuba on August 13th-15th, 2015. The U.S. State Department invited me to the flag raising ceremony at the United States Embassy in Havana and the reception that followed at the home of the interim ambassador. As we neared the José Martí International Airport, I was overcome by an unexpected peaceful feeling.



My cousins were waiting for me. I met family members that had not yet been born or were not part of my family that last time I was in Havana. I immediately loved them. Just one nephew who was in Pinar del Río, and could not find a way to get to Havana, was not there. I know I will love him after our very first embrace. On August 14<sup>th</sup>, I entered the Embassy patio. Among the people there, there were a few Cubans, including

some, who like me, had been in favor of the raising of the embargo and the reestablishment of diplomatic relations for decades. It was an historic day, but also one for healing wounds, and not only for those born in Cuba. The United States and Cuba had finally become neighbors once again. In fact, this incipient neighborliness is more complicated for Havana than the 54 years of enmity.

Richard Blanco—the Cuban-American poet who recited at Barack Obama’s second inauguration—read the poem “Cosas del Mar,” which began with the following words:

El mar no importa,  
Lo que importa es esto.  
Todos somos del mar entre nosotros,  
Todos nosotros.

[The sea is not important,  
What is important is this.  
We all belong to the sea between us,  
All of us.]

Although there was no specific reference to them, the tens of thousands of Cubans who lost their lives in the Florida Straits were also present there. What Secretary of State John Kerry’s said was respectful, but he did not mince words regarding human rights and democracy. He met with members of the opposition and independent civil society at the Ambassador’s home. Human rights are ours, either because we believe that God gave them to us as an inalienable part of our being, or because our shared humanity obliges us to treat everyone with dignity. Human rights are not favors that governments doll out at will.

When the rights of a group of citizens are violated, all of our rights are transgressed, even if the authorities have not abused us directly. Everyday Cubans support rapprochement between Cuba and the United States. Even so, I worry that their expectations not be met. Although only Congress has the power to lift the embargo, President Obama has taken steps that weaken some of its restrictions. Despite the existing prohibitions, trips by Americans—not including Cuban Americans—have increased by 35% since January 2015. Delegations of individuals from private sector, universities, professional

associations, and employees of local, state and federal government delegations travel to Cuba to get to know her first hand. Complete normalization, which requires that both Havana and Washington do their part, will take time. If the Cuban government does not speed up the pace of reforms in Cuba, everyday Cubans will not be able to improve the daily lives of their families. Those who are self-employed or who rent rooms in their homes to tourists or other foreigners, for example, essentially live using convertible *pesos*. CUCs allow them to satisfy their basic needs in well-stocked stores. Yet, the vast majority of Cubans are paid in non-convertible *pesos* that add up to an average of \$20 per month. The State worries more about applying restrictions on the emerging, Cuban middle class, than creating opportunities for the vast majority.

Cuba needs to modernize its infrastructure, which is not as developed as the average Latin American country's. Foreign investors require transparency, secured property rights, and flexible laws. The Cuban government also needs access to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Despite the fact the Helms-Burton Law prohibits U.S. representatives of those institutions voting in favor of Cuba's access, Havana needs to request it. If it gains said access, the Cuban government will have to submit detailed reports regarding the real state of the Cuban economy to the World Bank and IMF. Cuba is preparing for the Pope Francis's visit on September 12<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>. Shortly after his election, Pope Francis cautioned Catholics not to be "disciples of ideology." Religious and political ideologies value being right over being compassionate. No ideology is worth more than human beings.

# *Anti-Racism in the Twilight of the Cuban Revolution\**

José Hugo Fernández

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**A**nti-racism in Cuba has no surname. It is practiced as something basically decent, but from an unscrupulous perspective with only one goal, which is not authentic. In Cuba, we frequently hear the term “leftist, anti-racist fighter.” There is no reason to question the moral integrity and civility of these so-called, surnamed

anti-racists. What is sad, absurd, harmful is that their surnames function as a sort of safeguard when facing political power, to the detriment of other anti-racists who are not considered leftists, no matter how authentic they seem—even when it comes to people with leftist politics.



In order to avoid being pigeonholed as a “leftist anti-racist” it is enough to show yourself as being in opposition to the government.” If, on the other hand, you are known as a “leftist anti-racist,” you will receive legal backing to denounce manifestations of racism, so long as you don’t go into the government’s blame in this. If you are an anti-racist who is politically opposed to the government, you can go to prison just for organizing a (totally apolitical) cultural event for black children in any marginal, Havana neighborhood. It is not pertinent to combat prejudice from within prejudice. Going beyond a ghetto mentality while having a ghetto mentality will probably not take us much beyond just nonsense and inappropriateness. And, that is one of the serious problems that today’s struggle against discrimination faces, in general, but particularly when it comes to racial discrimination. Cuban anti-racist who take action at the periphery, or against the government, have been forced to develop their activism in particularly difficult and very hostile circumstances. On the one hand, they must face over half a century of official speeches and rhetoric that were good at promoting themselves regarding public opinion as vehicles of an authentically anti-racist revolution. However, they never delved sufficiently into the essence of racism, nor did they explore radical solutions. On the other hand, they must carry out their activism under constant harassment on the part of the government’s repressive forces, and in the face of its very effective propaganda

machine, which is all powerful within in Cuba and efficient in its communications abroad. Pursued, silenced and slandered with no right or space in which to defend their selves, these activists have carried out a mission that has special relevance to Cuba’s contemporary history. Nevertheless, too little is known about their struggle, not only abroad, but also within Cuba (which is worse yet). The trail of abuses, intolerance, injustices, defamation, physical and psychological abuses, imprisonment, and social ostracism these anti-racist Cuban activists opposed to the governmental policies have endured is something that in and of itself is enough to doubt the transparency of official rhetoric. Political repression against peaceful, inclusive, anti-racist events is just another long chapter in this this history, one that is very difficult to understand for those who have not thoroughly explored Cuba’s current reality. It is unprecedented. After having wasted the most propitious moments and best material conditions that have existed for racially challenging the economic poverty and social retrogression that Cuban blacks have endured throughout our country’s whole history, the government seems set on deploying one of its old aberrations: monopolizing anti-racist rhetoric. Anything that is said or done regarding anti-racism must first receive an official blessing. The legitimacy or well-intentioned nature of anything’s underpinnings does not matter. The only thing that matters is if it contradicts some detail, or in some



phrase, what the government wants to hear, which brings with it an accusation and sentence for being revisionist and even counterrevolutionary, or worse yet, a accomplice or mercenary paid for by a foreign enemy. This is about an obstacle with which we've had to deal since the

Cuban revolution's early days, both with regards to politics and to socio-economic issues. It has been a major factor in worsening the crisis we endure now, in a general sense, and which affects Afro-descendants, particularly adversely.



Worse yet, there seems to be some contrary purpose at foot, given the government's feigned liberalization and reforms, which not only makes it harder to find a collective light at the end of the tunnel, but is also boycotting anti-racist discussions, because (according to the government) it breeds discord and lack of unity among their participants. Even when their aspirations seem quite similar, anti-racist, Cuban sympathizers, scholars, and activists are being torn apart to the degree they are becoming irreconcilable (and sometimes hostile) rivals, much more on account of their focus than for their feelings or purpose. It is a painful situation that should be rejected outright, by everyone, quite aside from anyone's ideological

leanings. It is perturbing and openly harmful to the anti-racist cause's interests. In principle, the so-called "leftist anti-racists" should reject it, since it is they who have the best chance of being heard by officialdom. Yet so far as I know, they have done so, or they have not gone much beyond agreeing to participate in light weight exchanges of ideas with anti-government anti-racists, and only at very few events on the subject, and only in the past few months. One of the anti-racist activists who is deemed to be unequivocally rightwing has written about the "leftist anti-racists": "The first thing those consecrated warriors should do on behalf of equality is separate their political and ideological preferences from the issue of

social, human, and moral considerations associated with the race problem.” That is an honest-to-God truth whose weight is backed by air, but nothing else. As for the rest, although it seems useless, I am reminded of the fact that we refer to political power in Cuba we are not talking about an ordinary government. Instead, it is about a government who control has been uninterrupted for more than half a century; its structure has not varied. It has never faced a decisive, strong opposition, or countering legal parties. It has existed in a climate of internal peace and concord, and had absolute control over the country’s entire economic reserves and the nation’s socio-cultural potential. It is a necessary truth that cannot be hidden or nuanced that this unparalleled power did not do all it should have in our hemisphere. Much less did it do all it could have to significantly transform slavery’s shameful legacy. It is not that Cuban slave descendants have not done something to progress regarding social demands in recent decades, but it is embarrassing and disconcerting to compare today’s results with the enormous gains that the government could have offered them over so long a stable and unchanging administration with such extraordinary power. It is certainly true that it seems as though it has been publishing books, allowed studies, and sponsored periodical publications in its desire to find rapid solutions. These have all been under its control and in special environments, but about topics that for decades were kept

under lock and key. At the same time, it seems to have ordered a reevaluation of the limitations or open censorship that has for so long weighed on religious manifestation of African origin. There is also a review of history underway now, for the purpose of rescuing issues, events, and figures that were heretofore relegated by historians and the public education system. Furthermore, more and more spaces are opening up for organizations rooted in civil society with special focus on history and a special interest in slave descendants, an essential element of Cuban nationality that has never before received the attention it deserves. Everything is being pushed simultaneously, quite rapidly; everything is under the government’s aegis or tight supervision. Everything happens within the strict parameters it imposes. Of course, despite its meager nature, we must be grateful for this new development. Unfortunately, what is bothersome, however, because it is so revealing, is that all this has been done over a very short period of time when compared to the many decades the government allowed to go by without even trying to do this. Now all this is going on in the midst of an unprecedented, economic crisis. If we analyze things even minimally, the attenuating circumstances the government is facilitating to defend for its own defense via leftist anti-racists are not only aggravating, as they are what the law requires, in any event, but are from being any real help for their defenders. It puts them in the

embarrassing position of trying to theoretically validate something that negates everyday practice. A thorough analysis of contradictions such as these looks bad for the government, which is why it resorts to mediating the anti-racist conversation, halting its most loyal activists, condemning those who dare to disrespect the limits, and indolently stirring up rancor among them, pitting them against one another. Official media and historiography, as well as the researchers, academics and intellectuals who work on the subject of anti-racism

within the State's parameters, the "leftist anti-racist fighters," in other words, find themselves playing a role (an uncomfortable one, I suppose). They must distort history in order to find justifications and circumvent rather than conclusive truths. Of course, it is their responsibility not to get into this power game, but doing so publicly means becoming a revisionist, if not rightwing, which the government stigmatizes as bands of enemies of both Cuba and socialism.



In the twilight of the Cuban revolution, racism continues being a shameful chain that we began to drag behind us ever since the nation's earliest foundations. This two-sided division of its most notable proponents seriously affects the anti-racist struggle. It is absurd split motivated by the political interests of those in the country's leadership.

It renders the struggle subjectively and hinders a harmonious cooperation of its protagonists. Can we consider ourselves capable of breaking the ancient and shameful chain of our slave heritage if we don't begin by being able to break this weak link?

(\*) Paper presented on the “Racismo and Raciocinio: Movimiento, Medios, Debate y Legalidad” [Racism and Reason: Movement, Media, Debate and Legality], organized by the Platform for Cuban Integration, for the LASA 2015 conference, in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

# *LASA and the Cuban Regime: An Undesirable Invasion*

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I am told that about 300 Cubans formally connected to or favorable towards the Cuba's governing machine vied for spots on the island's official delegation for the 2015 LASA (Latin American Studies Association) conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In the end, some 150 attended, among them delegates and invitees; this number may be higher than that of the sum of all the other Latin American representatives combined. This is not the only fact that highlights the government's interest in making the conference its very own dais and platform from which to promote itself, but in and of itself it can give one an idea of the effort that is put into this. It is also not just any old effort given LASA is the world's largest professional association of its kind; it has nearly 10,000 members. Among them are experts from any and all disciplines relating to Latin America who are devoted to research, intellectual debate, and teaching, as well as to promoting civic commitment through communications technology and live meetings. It has yet to be seen to what degree the obvious Cuban government's ideological penetration strategy is working in LASA. It is an issue not even

analysts have taken the trouble to examine, probably because this penetration has little (and always less) potential for actually influencing the continent's destiny, if not for other reasons, as well.

To be modern also means finally realizing what is no longer possible. Most of the region's social scientists already know that a model of a system such as that of a totalitarian dictatorship for the purpose of supporting certain values is irrelevant, or inadmissible, even in those cases where there is sympathy for it. Yet, even if the Cuban regime's ability to rise above the thoughts and actions of Latin America's new political direction seem limited, its intention with the closeness of its relationships with LASA's core cannot be futile. This organization's enormous power, influence and well-earned respect among Latin America's intelligentsia and, among new groups, particularly, must be considered an unbeatable way for the hemisphere's oldest dictatorship to seek legitimation.

## ***Cuba at LASA***

Upon leafing through the extensive lists of presentation titles about Cuba that

were presented at the 2015 LASA conference as well as previous ones, one must notice the high number of them that mention or allude to the Cuban government's system as the primary agent in achieving high rates of human development; they are said to serve as an enviable example for the entire continent and the whole Third World. Few are the presentations that delve into the dramatic reality endured over decades by deep Cuba's millions of inhabitants. If one finds one or a few papers (from more recent years) about urgent matters, they are essentially considered reflective of the disintegration of the European socialist camp and/or of the worldwide, general crisis. The regime's devastation of our economic and socio-cultural structures, and even of many old traditions, like respect and love of work, respect for other's rights, the law, or order, as well as of harmonious coexistence, have been almost magically buried under cold facts and numbers the regime uses to systematically saturate international institutions. Such is also the case with its inflated claims regarding education, public health, focus on children, and even the struggle against racial and gender discrimination.

Blandishing clever statistics, which, of course, serve as tools for researchers, scholars, and academics (since they have access to no other, non-official, "scientific" indicators), the Cuban regime must have planned its insertion into LASA (some may, in fact, not want to consult other sources). The Cuba Section would take care of the rest; it grows more every year, like a fattened calf; it is directed from the island by people in the official *nomenklatura*. Their mission is to fulfill the regime's legitimating goals, but while seeming to represent an alternative set of

intellectuals and scholars. These, in turn, defend its hypotheses, and concomitantly disqualify others, and strive so that other, authentically alternative versions or studies about the country's reality be acknowledged, or at least minimized.

### *The tribulations of a panel*

I had the honor of being part of a panel, "*Racismo y Raciocinio: Movimiento, Medios, Debate, y Legalidad*" [Racism and Reason: Movement, Media, Debate, and Legality], at the recently concluded 2015 LASA conference. I was in the company of other well-known, anti-racist leaders and members of the internal opposition in Cuba, Manuel Cuesta Morúa and Juan Antonio Madrazo Luna, as well as with Dr. Juan Antonio Alvarado, of the Platform for Cuban Integration, and Editor-in-Chief of the journal *IDENTIDADES*. Puerto Rican academics Guillermo F. Rebollo-Gil and Ariadna M. Godreau Aubert, were also on the panel. They were going to find themselves in the uncomfortable position of sharing the experience of being treated as a lonely minority; I know not if by accident or informed choice. They had to endure all the delays and lack of deference this entailed. Of course, never did this treatment come from any LASA functionaries. As formal invitees, we were to receive the same attentions from the hosts in San Juan as all other delegates. I was probably not LASA, but its very active and pushy Cuba Section (abusing its power as the island's official actor) that would take charge of ensuring that each one of the members of our small sub-delegation be housed at a different hotel, all of which were quite distant from each other and offered no way for us to be communicate with each other or even be able to easily

see each other and exchange impressions or information beyond that having to do with scheduled transport to the Caribe Hilton, which was the conference's main site, so we could go listen to other panels. In addition, as if that weren't enough, we all had difficulty with our lodging upon arriving at our respective hotels. For some inexplicable reason, the reservations were made for the day after our arrival, that is, for the day the conference would already be under way. This error (if it was an error) almost caused us to have to sleep in a park or under a bridge in San Juan. It was hard to see that affront as a simple coincidence, especially when we were able to confirm that the large, official, Cuban delegation did not have the same fate. Nevertheless, if we still had any doubt about this potentially unplanned intervention, we were quickly able to dispel it when we discovered the place our panel had been assigned, one of the few (and surely the only one with Cubans) that had to take place at the Ponce de León B room, in the Condado area, outside and far from the Caribe Hilton. Attendance at our panel was guaranteed to be almost non-existent, except, perhaps, for a few people who found this out before hand, and were particularly interested in hearing us and willing to miss hearing other panels, given the location's distance from the rest, and the time and date: 8:00AM on the conference's last morning, Saturday, May 30<sup>th</sup>. Worse yet, there had been a huge party for the delegates the night before that went on into the wee hours; what a coincidence that it was organized by LASA's Cuba Section.

***The obligatory result***

Of course, this was not time ill spent or lost, given the fact the presentations took

place and enriched LASA's conceptual framework. As such, they are available to any unconvinced scholar who does not accept the limitations of Cuba's altered statistics and official sources. Yet, it is still lamentable that these presentations were deprived of the opportunity of being heard in the same place and with the same possibilities and audience as that of the works presented at the event by the Cuban regime's appointees. Furthermore, it seems inappropriate (for lack of a better term) that this happened at an event whose main focus called for the protection of "insecurities, exclusions, and emergencies." Some of our small panel's presentations are quite useful for anyone who wants to know and understand the inequalities suffered by poor people in Cuba, who are almost the entirety of the population, especially blacks and *mestizos*, who are the majority. They also serve to respond to LASA's call for a need to examine and expose the inequalities that plague so many of the continent's inhabitants with integrity. Similarly, they highlight the essential importance of focusing on the need for initiating real political, constitutional and legal reforms on the island, as a necessary step towards the empowerment of a citizenry historically denied or held back, as in the case of slave descendants. On this subject, Cuesta Morúa's presentation, "*La Ley afirmativa y la Reforma Constitucional*" [Affirmative Law and Constitutional Reform], and Madrazo Luna's "*Debate Racial: Espacios fiscalizados vs. Espacios de resistencia en la Cuba Contemporánea*" [Racial Debate: Fiscalized Spaces vs. Resistance Spaces in Contemporary Cuba] are excellent. My own paper, "*El antirracismo en el ocaso de la revolución cubana*" [Anti-

Racism in the Twilight of the Cuban Revolution] attempts to call attention to the absurd and embarrassing fact that Cuban, anti-racist activists are now divided into two opposite, and sometimes hostile, groups. This is the result of a political strategy by those in power; they are bent on not acknowledging and even persecuting and harassing those who have resolved to carry out their work at the margin of, and even in opposition to, the regime's structures. There has even been the extreme case of these anti-discriminatory activists being discriminated against, on account of their political sympathies or dislikes. Unfortunately, and much to our surprise, we would actually find the greatest evidence of this at the LASA conference, through the treatment that was specially designed for us.

Something else that ended up being quite lamentable, although even more so for us (out of basic decency and professional solidarity) was that our panel's Puerto Rican professors were innocent victims of the very same treatment, which is even worse because they didn't even totally embrace our political positions, and their papers, "*Guaynabo City es un País*" [Guaynabo is a Country], by Rebollo-Gil, and "*Esa Tipa es una #Yal: La Mujer Negra y la Violencia Lúdica del 'Buen Racismo'*" [That Woman is a #Yal: Black Women and the Playful Violence of "Good Racism"], by Godreau Aubert, were very focused on the problems of inequality in Puerto Rico.

They will both have to learn not to mix with bad company at the next conference. Meanwhile, to those Cubans who are not familiar with or are against the tactics the Cuba Section imposes at LASA, all we can do is confide that LASA makes the most of its very well-known professional credibility and moral authority to ensure that something as undesirable as this attempted invasion by the Cuban regime does not happen again.



# *The Race Debate and the Lefts: Consensuses and Dissonances*

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It is possible to identify positions espousing a number of leftist ideas in Cuba's current socio-political scene, within an even broader and diverse context. This is understood as an ideological and political universe that brings together everything from libertarian militancy, to social democracy, to even communists, who have broadened the monopolizing pretensions of official rhetoric. Each one of them has its own views about subject such as social justice, political democracy, and models for socio-economic development. Their perspectives also differ regarding a growing and ever more visible problem and debate within Cuban society. It is increasing visible in both emerging and official rhetoric: the race issue. The reality and debate generated are tied to the emergence of new actors: academics,

artists, and activists who have put the race problem front and center in their work. If one were to consult studies or statistics about the impact of the crisis brought about by the fall of the socialist bloc, one would see that blacks and mulattoes have suffered the worst, and the situation is even worse if one considers women and the inhabitants of Cuba's impoverished Oriente (eastern) province, cradle of all of the island's political and social revolutions. Given this reality, one that has turned back progress and benefits brought about by the governing policies developed since the triumph of 1959, historian Alejandro de la Fuente asserts the following regarding the period since the end of the last century: "Originally promoted by intellectuals, musicians, writers, and artists...the Afro-Cuban movement has been able to break the official silence

that covered up the race issue in Cuba over time. In recent years, the struggle for racial equality has been enriched by the participation of organizations and activists that have translated the denunciations to the language of citizens' rights. While the Afro-Cuban movement has grown in complexity and diversity, in parallel fashion the debate of recent years has been producing a series of large topics that enjoy shared interest. These points of agreement perhaps foretell of a possibility for a consensual program and joint action."<sup>1</sup> There is broad consensus among Cuban researchers and activists of all ideological positions with regard to the racial discrimination and about how little the problem is reflected in the mass media or in public spaces for conversation. Quite a few analysts and activists confirm that their concerns and proposals are kept within closed discursive spaces and never incorporated into public policies.<sup>2</sup> There is even growing consensus about the evidence of discrimination against Afro-descendants, and not only from a cultural point of view (explicit prejudices, and the invisibility of the subject, absence of Cuban historiography about the contributions of Afro-descendant intellectuals, union leaders, military men, and politicians to Cuba's creation and development, as well the absence of race studies in the educational system), but also sociological one: the disproportionate number of Afro-descendants in the prison population and the lowest paying jobs, reduced access to

family remittances, their minimum presence in jobs paid in convertible currency, as well as the marked difference in the acquisition power of white, black, or *mestizo* families.<sup>3</sup> The axis that reveals the dissonances amongst the different Cuban lefts has to do with the possibility for Afro-descendants to autonomously organize, and the addition of their demands for positive public policies to face the problem. On the other hand, from officialdom's point of view, autonomy and agency independent of the State are demonized as ideological positions contrary to "socialism" and the "Revolution." This ideological conception, when applied to public policies and mechanisms of social control, was copied by the Cuban government from "real socialism." Such has been the case not only with these historic experiences, but also with the demonization of human rights, particularly civil and political rights which, no matter how liberal, are contrary to "socialism" and "socialist democracy." Our attention focuses on the positions assumed by these three leftist groups about the debate about the race problem: *organic*<sup>4</sup> intellectuals and activists; *alternative* intellectuals, artists, and writers; and *opponentist* intellectuals, artists, and activists. Our intention is to reveal their points of consensus and, above all, their divergent positions, and identity representation strategies and civic actions. We do not include in our analysis musicians and artists who speak on the subject in their

work, because it is in the public discourse of intellectuals and activists where we find mention of relevant topics associated with racial discrimination: nation/ethnicity, group identity/national identity, homogeneity/diversity, autonomy/State-Party dependence, and complete nation-building project/a nation-building project that is constantly changing.

### *The organic left*

This left is definable due to its adherence to certain values and ideas that, like its own constituents, as well as other members of society, identify with the *Revolution*.<sup>5</sup> Its exponents develop their reflection and discussions within the regime's political frameworks—its institutions, agendas, and ideological alignments—in relative harmony with the positions established by the State's maximum leaders.<sup>6</sup> They consider it possible to reform this model, and say as much in publications, forums, and texts (both academic and opinion blogs).<sup>7</sup> Their actions have simultaneously contributed to and conflicted with officialdom's policies for controlling the debate and fragmenting the public sphere, and to the necessary introduction of relevant topics: inequality, sexism, racism, etc., and the sustaining of a reflective space of sorts. It is more or less tolerated and sophisticated, even given the political and theoretical stagnation and conservatism of moments like the "Battle of Ideas" (2000-2006). According the UNEAC's Aponte Commission (a Commission of the

National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists),<sup>8</sup> comprised of a number of *organic* intellectuals, the race issue finds in "the Revolution the following; that with its "social justice work" and "equality of opportunities for all Cubans" (which is the practical and ideological framework for solving 'a legacy of economic inequality, social positioning, and cultural devaluation'), the government has not been able to eliminate in revolutionary power's extremely short time." Everyone knows that "laws beneficial to the people are not enough," and that a "transformation of social structures and an uprooting of persistent prejudices" is necessary." Yet, the Commission proposes a defensive and dividing line regarding "some Cubans who seek the supposed solution to this delicate issue in political play," calling for the country's problems to be "resolved by Cubans themselves." Lastly, it creates a combination of actions that are underway, always within official institutions and enjoying the protection of the "With the Revolution, everything; without the Revolution, nothing" slogan that has defined the State's cultural politics since 1961.<sup>9</sup> Other positions, like those of some *organic* intellectuals like Jesús Guanche, Pedro de Hoz, Denia García Ronda, and Esteban Morales, are also in keeping with the Cuban government's ideas. To some degree or another, they all emphasize the need to subordinate the race problem to that of "national unity" and the "national socialist project," who guarantor is the government. They tie

the conversation on race to the confrontation with the United States. Guanche argued his rejection of the conversation on “Afro-Cuban” identity in the journal *Espacio Laical*,<sup>10</sup> because he considers it harmful, from a cultural and ideological point of view. He believes the use of the terms “Afro-descendant” or “Afro-Cuban” as a strategy for cultural and ideological subversion against the cultural identity of the Cuban nation by Afro-descendant organizations in the U.S. deployed through scholarships and events to which Cuban Afro-descendants are invited. García Ronda argued in *Espacio Laical* 10 that a key problem for all Cubans is that we’re poor, which is an accurate view of the socio-economic development of Cuban families. Thus, he believes, that the demands made by Afro-descendants do not make any particular sense,<sup>11</sup> a focus makes invisible the inequalities, difference and diversity that, when seen in terms of race, become class and income inequalities, and reinforce them. De la Hoz, who is a member of the UNEAC Executive Board, rejects any plurality in the discussion inside and outside Cuba, and considers it ideologically ‘spurious’: ‘Those both outside and inside Cuba try to find fissures that will lead to the nation’s disintegration; the subject of raciality has become popular lately, for those with malicious interests.’<sup>12</sup> With regard to the State, he also rejects any discursive or organizational independence on the part of Afro-descendant activists or organizations. He

sees them as an assault on “national unity” and intentional, perverse attempts to break this “unity” from an ideological point of view. Morales agrees with De la Hoz, and also suspects anti-racist activists who are against the regime as part of a “U.S. conspiracy”: “Another important issue is that the subject [of raciality] became part of the “internal subversion” platform promoted and financed by the U.S. government a long time ago. Recently, some representatives of this movement have softened their rhetoric, which brings it closer to our positions. So, the criticism these individuals offer regarding the race issue in Cuba are not very different from ours: the idea that the race issue in Cuba would be resolved by a regime change, according to them, is no longer present in their political rhetoric. This may be because of the potential changes that may come about in the U.S.’s policy towards Cuba, or because they have realized that the solution they propose is too unpopular.”<sup>13</sup> The Aponte Commission has the following to say about this: “We do not agree with some Cubans who seek a supposed solution to this delicate topic through political play, especially because history has shown us for quite some time now that the country’s problems must be solved by Cubans, themselves, and not by serving the island up to international capital, particularly to U.S. capital.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, proposals for organizational autonomy and specific demands regarding representation and affirmative action are understood as “a political game” against

the Revolution or, as in Morales's case, as part of an "internal subversion" platform promoted and financed by the U.S. government. The Aponte Commission also rejects racial specificity and privileges ethnic affiliation, and Cuba's "miscegenation" above Afro-descendant interests.<sup>15</sup> "The UNEAC's Aponte Commission is not a black or 'Afro-Cuban' organization. Don Fernando Ortiz, a scholar who was able to unravel the complexity of race, called the Cuban people an *ajiaco* (a mixed stew) in which all the ethnic, racial, and cultural traits of the island's first groups, from Spain, the African continent, France, China, an other Asian and European elements came together. The heterogeneity of so unique an origin does not disallow for the creation of a unique, national, and inclusive ethnicity. We are all Cubans—blacks, mulattoes, and whites—and have our own religious idiosyncrasy and cultural miscegenation as part of our essence; all those who are born in this land of heroes and heroines are represented by skin color on the Commission."<sup>16</sup> The following conclusion, "We are not characterized by confrontation, but rather by our search for solutions, debate, discussion, and controversy in appointed spaces, at opportune times, and appropriate contexts," excludes from any discussion those who are not "revolutionary," those who do not speak within the parameters of official, State institutions, or the civil society that the State acknowledges. With Revolution, everything; without Revolution, nothing."<sup>17</sup> This State-

centric view of the problem, in conjunction with governmental political alignments and rhythms, as well as the homogenization of the population by evoking "miscegenation," subordinate diversity and difference to the "nationalist unity" promoted by official rhetoric. Thus, cultural and sociological topics regarding racial discrimination in Cuba have no access to the mass media's public spaces, or those of the press. Demands for specific public policies to solve the problem are also not heard: in addition, the "nation-building project" is frozen, since it is seen as defined, unique and done. Given this position, the race problem stagnates in its own invisibility and in the impossibility of developing public policies specific to any solution. There are two ideological limitations that prevent the government from changing its position. One the one hand is the focus on twentieth-century Marxism, which postponed and made invisible issue of gender, territories, and race: they were all subordinated to the taking of power and class struggle. On the other hand, there is the disdain for civil and political rights; they are understood as part of a "bourgeois" democracy that should be eradicated, something Cuba shares with all others who have experienced "real socialism." A third, political-conceptual limitation the historical leadership's ignorance about the race problem, because it thought that when it legally eradicated racial inequality and developed policies regarding equality for all social groups, that would automatically solve the

problem. The inequalities existing from the get go were not considered, and the issue was dropped very early on.

### ***The alternative left***

The second, abovementioned position grounds its public arguments and influence on the axis and limits established by *revolutionary* rhetoric; it borders on being a structural criticism of *State socialism*. Its forums, publications, and interventions are more open than *organic*, although personal or ideological issues such as those intellectuals close to the party or those of the openly *opponentist* persuasion still persist at the core. This tendency<sup>18</sup> embraces a diversity of topics and has the potential to operate within the connections built between diverse intellectuals and audiences. Generally, it aims itself at the part of the population that refuses to be situated within contaminated, political coordinates. Its development corresponds to the expansion of social diversity, and with the reaction to currently reigning cultural policies, which are becoming increasingly impossible to integrate in any appealing way, without sacrificing autonomy. It incorporates young, critical, leftist voices to feed of the emergence of autonomous social identities. Unlike the Aponte Commission, *alternative* activists from the *Cofradía de la Negritud* [Brotherhood of Blackness] propose a need for public discussion and its coverage by the mass media, as well as of concrete, public, pro-Revolutionary

policies to be included in State and semi-official institutions. Similarly, the Cuban government has not heard their demands either. If these *alternative* activists, in fact, direct their recommendations to officialdom (the parliament, educational system, popular organizations, etc.), they do not uphold their rhetoric by repeatedly invoking the “Revolution and its achievements,” but rather demand the “right of existence of social and community organizations whose purpose is to contribute to the nation’s efforts directed at eliminating racism, discrimination, and racial inequalities.” Similarly, they highlight the structural factors (poverty, marginalization, inequality) that reproduce the unfavorable situation of blacks and *mestizos*, and also make visible actions and speeches to which the police and other, diverse, State entities attribute this situation in the mass media. They demand “the promotion of the principle of equality of opportunities for all citizens in a real and effective manner as a prioritized social goal for the country’s policies.”<sup>19</sup>

### ***The leftist opposition***

This position suggests a break with the current political regime, although it does appeal to legal mechanisms and/or non-violent ones. The space in which they ‘operate’ are always and forever harassed by an official repression and fragmentation that impedes other colleagues from the *organic* left and, *alternative* one, to a lesser degree, from joining *opponentists* at forums and in

projects. To varying degrees of material sustainability, one sees in their postulates a greater and more successful overcoming of the tradition of not acknowledging other positions. This is true even in the presence of still persistent concerns stemming from the very same situation of harassment endured, and discrepancies with their *organic* and *alternative* counterparts' ideas. At their core, their efforts today are to get beyond the minimalist notions of liberal democracy that large sectors within the opposition embrace, even regarding social issues (racial, union-related, regarding women) and an explicit rejection of intervention from foreign states, especially of the U.S. embargo/blockade.<sup>20</sup> Proposals made by the *Comité Ciudadanos por la Integración Racial* [Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration] frame a struggle for equality and against racial discrimination within an agenda that promotes dialogue, coexistence, and pluralism as processes and scenarios in which the Cuban nation can develop. This development should involve Cuban residents both on the island and in its Diasporic communities, jointly with other anti-racist struggles and actors globally. To fulfill these objectives, and a calculated point of convergence regarding the notion of post-raciality, the Committee promotes civic, social, intellectual, academic or cultural actions and projects concerning the rights and needs of minorities or ethnic groups, on behalf establishing equality and respect as a necessary basis for social and

interethnic relations.<sup>21</sup> The anti-racist activists who are members of the Committee and classified as political and ideological oppositionists, who endure the corresponding reprisals due to their speeches and actions, propose as freedom of expression and association as essential to dialogue and any solution to the problem. This would be the basis upon which Afro-Cubans could fight against racial discrimination and insert into any government's agenda the economic, social, political, and cultural demands of Afro-descendants. Juan Antonio Madrazo Luna, the Committee's Coordinator, points out that the government has demonized the conversation on race because (according to it) it is part of the White House's agenda against Cuba, given that blacks and *mestizos* have become an object of interest for U.S. intelligence and other agencies. Thus, official rhetoric in Cuba does not conceive of autonomous platforms wanting to expand the conversation and put it in the public agenda. Those groups who attempt this are subject to different kinds of repression; there is no political will to allow the subject of racial discrimination to be included in the agenda for public conversation.<sup>22</sup> According to Madrazo Luna: "There have been many studies done in Cuba about racial discrimination over the last 20 years, about interracial relations and racial prejudices. These studies are valuable to areas like sociology, psychology, genetics, and anthropology, and are kept under wraps, as if they were State secrets. That is,

they may be presented abroad in an opportunistic way, at LASA,<sup>23</sup> for example.<sup>24</sup> Yet, ever since 1962, José Felipe Carneado<sup>23</sup> decreed that the issue of race had been deconstructed. There were many intellectuals and unionists at that time who were members of black and *mestizo* organizations prior to the Revolution's triumph. During that year, there was a TV debate between Juan René Betancourt<sup>25</sup> and Fidel Castro in which the former called upon the latter to keep the race issue on the public agenda. The official response was to expel him and exile him to Argentina, etc. There is also the case of Carlos Moore, a researcher with two doctorates from the University of Paris VII who is currently retired in Brazil. His positions caused him to be subjected to forced labor at a work camp due to his criticism of the Cuban government's official policies regarding racism.<sup>26</sup> He later requested exile at the Embassy of Guinea in Cuba. He has been "demonized" in Cuba on account of his global activism.<sup>27</sup> As far as institutional quotas are concerned, for example, Madrazo Luna affirms that the few black and *mestizo* members serve only cosmetically, as superficial makeup to cover up deeper problems), in the parliament's demographic makeup (quotas have long been defended as a governmental policy for youth, blacks, and women). This has gone on while limited but interesting initiatives are being discussed, some of which have been rejected out right by the officialdom that suggested them. The

*Color Cubano* initiative, which was "born in the 1990s, within the UNEAC, carried out a series of actions so that the conversation about race could be seen and heard publicly, and exist on the public agenda. There were many closed-door debates, but this institution's discussion group was discontinued. They created the [Aponte] Commission, which currently keeps the issue much more under wraps. Various bloggers who write about the problems of racial discrimination in Cuba have emerged on the scene, independently, but they are not known within the country. Only those who have Internet access do."<sup>28</sup> A suggestive synthesis that has been developed from that position focuses on the way in which the race problem has been dealt with historically in Cuba: "The Colony had no interest in resolving the problem of blacks; the Republic acknowledged the problem and allowed associationism and public debate about it, but did not create or employ institutional solutions; the Revolution took educational and institutional measures, but dismantled civil society and its corresponding rights."<sup>29</sup>

### ***(In)Conclusive words for a worsening problem***

Given demands for the acknowledgement and overcoming of historical silences and exclusions, a State and party strategy for the problem of racial discrimination depends on Afro-descendant interests and demands being subordinated to "national unity" and putting off an open, nationwide



40conversation about it. The reason: because they are afraid of fracturing. It also homogenizes the population's ethnic composition through *miscegenation* and makes inequalities invisible. Similarly, the lack of a political will to develop the policies necessary to resolve the social, economic, and political inequalities that affect Afro-descendants is quite obvious. The Cuban government rhetorically acknowledges diversity and difference in its documents,<sup>30</sup> but not *de facto*. It remains reticent to implementing affirmative actions to move the solution forward. The way current reforms have been developing is widening the gap between favored individuals and groups, and those have been turned into losers due to the changes. These people—urban rural workers, families that receive no remittances, women, blacks, *mestizos*, the elderly, people who live outside Havana province—have no place in this new marketplace and the State continues to administer and limit their rights. This situation forces one to redefine and reconsider topics such as racial discrimination. Any agenda for social activism and, more over, any political platform regarding Cuba's future, must include these excluded voices and demands.

### Notes:

1- Alejandro de la Fuente "Tengo una raza oscura y discriminada. El movimiento afrocubano: hacia un programa consensuado", *Revista Nueva*

*Sociedad*, 11/1/2012. We consider the contributions of this historian, as well as Víctor Fowler's and Carlos Moore's, among the most suggestive view onto the issue of race in Cuba, and that they impact discussion of the subject in Cuba's public sphere and its Diaspora. The problem regarding the array of social conflicts in post-Revolutionary Cuba has also been treated by Marxist intellectual Samuel Farber in some of this most recent work.

2- The *Cofradía de la Negritud's* concrete proposals for public policies made on June 22, 2011, are still awaiting action for the government. See the proposals at <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/coneg/delaceiba22junio11.htm>

3- It has also been impossible to correlate housing variables regarding access by whites, blacks, and *mestizos*, due to classification procedures for blacks and *mestizos* in the last National Census (2012), which have made it seemingly impossible to see or make inferences about these inequalities from the information available.

4- These people also can be called *oficialistas* (party liners), depending on the degree to which they limit the orientation of their rhetoric and practices to the acknowledged parameters of the official line and the practices and of State and Party institutions. Nevertheless, some add cultural and social demands to the government's agenda

5- This *organic* position fits with the cultural policy created in the 1990s by Abel Prieto. It served to reformulate State hegemony, replacing Marxist rhetoric with a form of nationalism supposed rooted in Martí. This was accomplished through an arsenal of selective, coopting and censoring

techniques. Today, this political culture is overtaken by actions, and the very wealth and broadness of perspectives regarding issues like history, culture, and politics both inside and outside the island.

6- During the past decade, a positive inflexion emerged in traditional rhetoric about the “overcoming of racism,” when the State’s highest leadership (Fidel Castro) suddenly acknowledged the survival and reproduction of problems that tie the race issue to levels of poverty and disadvantages when considering inclusion and social ascension.

7- A paradigmatic example of this position can be found in the project (journal, forum space, etc.) *Temas*. See <http://www.temas.cult.cu/>.

8- An institution financed by the Cuban Ministry of Culture. <http://www.uneac.org.cu/>

<sup>9</sup>See the Aponte Commission’s Declaration at <http://martianos.ning.com/profiles/blogs/declaraci-n-de-la-comisi-n-aponte-ante-la-convocatoria-de-la>

10- Read about this debate in *Espacio Laical* V: 18 (April-June 2009). Dossier: “¿Existe una problemática racial en Cuba? Presentación.” At <http://espaciolaical.org/> 34-51. The author seems to be unaware of the importance and example derived from the representational politics of U.S. Afro-descendants as part of their identity creation, and as part of the agenda of their anti-racist struggle; it is used as a way to defend the supposed “cultural purity” of Cuba’s national culture.

11- See “Seguramente soy negra y no me ha dado cuenta”, in Sección Catalejo, *Temas*, April 15, 2013, at <http://temas.cult.cu/catalejo.php>

12- Pedro de la Hoz “Justicia social y color cubano: cercanas realidades”, *Granma*, August 27th, 2013.

13- See Esteban Morales’ July 14th, 2014 text at <http://estebanmoralesdominguez.blogspot.mx/>. There is no factual or discursive evidence to suggest that anti-racist activists are fighting for a regime change financed by the U.S. government. They do persistently validate the black and *mestizo* organizations that advanced the issue of race in Cuba and demanded basic rights like freedom of publication and association, which were eliminated by the State’s monopoly over the mass media. This is part of the administered and “demonized” view of human, civil, and political rights that the Cuban government promotes.

14- See the Declaration of the Aponte Commission at the VIIIth UNEAC Congress, August 2013, at <http://martianos.ning.com/profiles/blogs/declaraci-n-de-la-comisi-n-aponte-ante-la-convocatoria-de-la>.

15- The quotes around the word ‘miscegenation’ are there because in the Cuban case (it is not unique to Cuba) the tendency is to homogenize populations that are not equally socially included, a strategy for minimizing the importance or making invisible of differences. This leads to the absence of specific public policies and/or the creation of erratic public policies for dealing with the problem. The first step for crafting adequate public policies is to acknowledge the problem, and research and confirm empirical data that evidence racial inequality in Cuba.

16- Ibid.

17- Ibid.

18- Individuals and groups within the *Observatorio Crítico* represent this and others like it. See <http://observatoriocriticodesdecuba.wordpress.com/>

19-See <http://observatoriocriticodesdecuba.wordpress.com/2011/06/23/propuesta-de-la-cofradia-de-la-negritud/>

20-A notable referent in this trend is the political and intellectual work of historian Manuel Cuesta Morúa, leader of the *Arco Progresista* social-democratic platform, and member of the Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration. See

[http://www.cuba-progresista.org/default.asp?page=Arco\\_progres](http://www.cuba-progresista.org/default.asp?page=Arco_progres)

21-See <http://www.cir-integracion-racial-cuba.org/informacion/>

22-See Antonio Madrazo Luna in the video "Racismo en Cuba": <http://vocescubanas.com/razonesciudadanas/> July 7, 2010.

23- The Latin American Studies Association.

24- José Felipe Carneado (1915-93) was Head of the Department of Sciences, Culture, and Teaching Centers for the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee.

25- Juan René Betancourt is a political activist who fights for the rights of Afro-Cubans. Consult the blog *Posracialidad* (CIR) at <http://www.cir-integracion-racial-cuba.org/juan-rene-betancourt/>

26- About Carlos Moore's activities, author of *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* (1989), see the review on the *Posracialidad* (CIR) blog: <http://www.cir-integracion-racial-cuba.org/carlos-moore/>

27-See Antonio Madrazo Luna at loc. cit.

28- Ibid.

29-*Proyecto Social* 34-49, January 2013, at the *Programa de la Corriente Socialista Democrática Cubana*, Anteproyecto: [http://www.cuba-progresista.org/default.asp?page=Arco\\_progres](http://www.cuba-progresista.org/default.asp?page=Arco_progres) 38.

# *Waiting for Housing*

Yusimí Rodríguez

Journalist

Havana, Cuba

Robert Siegel (of *National Public Radio*) interviewed me on March 10th. His primary interest was to learn about racial inequality, a topic that is almost always difficult to explain to foreigners, who come with the notion that the Cuban Revolution eliminated racism and had offered equal access to education and employment to whites, *mestizos*, and blacks. To deny this outright would not be fair or true, but the affirmation that there is no racism or racial inequality would be like contradicting our own government, which has (begrudgingly) acknowledged these problems in our fair and socialist society. Yet, explaining it and, ever more so, demonstrating it as you stroll through a tourist zone in Old Havana, with its hotels, picture postcard buildings, and tourists, was difficult. I have yet to know why my interviewer wanted us to cross Havana Bay on the ferryboat to Regla, a Havana neighborhood I had not seen since 2002, when I accompanied my mother to its church. I was worried that I might know less about Regla than Siegel and his entourage: a woman who handled the mics, the producer, and the Cuban interpreter. When we had just turned one

of the church's intersections, a pregnant woman bore down upon us (a later learned her name was Kirenia). "Are you from Canal Habana? Come with me; what you need to film is over there..." She pointed to the entrance of turned out being an *albergue* ['provisional shelter']. "I've been living here five years, but mine has been a special case since I was 11." She was 32 years old. I had to disappoint her. I was not from Canal Habana. The people with me were not Cuban nor were they there on account of her or her problems. In any event, we crossed the street and Siegel had the opportunity to hear her story and those of the other *albergue* inhabitants (people who had been there who knows how long), and to see the interior of some of the extremely narrow cubicles, with their detectable humidity and visible, cracking walls. They had makeshift lofts or mezzanines in them, to maximize space. The fact that Kirenia took us to the *albergue* may have helped show Siegel what I could not on the other side of the bay: all the folks we saw in that *albergue* were black. Nevertheless, I felt that was not enough for those stories to be shown as part of an article in which others were the focus. I promised Kirenia and her

mother (Santa) I'd be back. It has taken me over a month to fulfill that promise: I am certain that Santa, who immediately recognized me, was surprised.

### ***There are no evictions in Cuba***

The cubicle's furnishings consist of three small chairs; a fan was resting on one of them. Santa had to move it so I could sit. She told me Kirenía was in the hospital with pneumonia.



### **Santa's cubicle**

**Santa:** It has rained and there is a lot of humidity. But her pregnancy is not in danger. They had her in intensive care, but she was able to go to a ward.

**YR:** Tell me what happened in 1993, when your daughter was 11.

**Santa:** As far as I know, there are no evictions in Cuba.

**YR:** The Cuban Revolution did away with that.

**Santa:** Well, the police and the [housing] authorities came into my home and tore everything down. What my daughter always talks about and cannot forget is that when she woke up, the first thing she saw was the sky; the sky as a roof.

**YR:** Where were you?

She hemmed and hawed, lowered her eyes, but ended up confessing to me that

she had been in prison for six months. Her mother took care of Kirenía and her younger brother, but he wasn't home at that time either. Upon returning, the girl was out on the street, crying.

**Santa:** My daughter is in possession of letters written about me as a social case, while I was in prison. The very same day I got a pass, I got home and found all my stuff on the street, the wardrobe, just rotting, etc. I had a three-day pass, but was so traumatized that I went back that very day.

**YR:** Why was your home demolished? Was it in bad condition, uninhabitable?

**Santa:** It was made of wood, but it wasn't in bad shape; it was new. They just ordered its destruction. I actually don't know who ordered this. I already told you where I was at the time. When I arrived, I did not find my mother, my children. Everything was on the street, wardrobe, clothes, etc.

**YR:** Might it not be the case that those who demolished it didn't know there was someone in it?

**Santa:** Yes. They knew it, but first they tore down the roof, so they could then take the girl out. She was the only one home at the time.

**YR:** What about your younger son?

**Santa:** He was with his maternal grandmother.

**YR:** Where was the father, your husband?

**Santa:** He, too, had problems. I was pregnant, and lost a baby girl. They did a Caesarean section on me, and she was fine at birth. But later, they would bring her to me, and when I asked about her,

they told me she had died. It hit me really bad and I left the hospital at my own risk, with stitches. When I was here, the Section Head came and asked me about my husband, who was working. He said he'd leave the citation for him to go to the Unit the next day. I was not doing well at all, and asked him to leave it on the TV, but I forgot to give it to my husband, and he just went to work the next day. That night, the Section Head came back with a policeman. They beat my husband; I tried to explain that I had lost my child and had forgotten to give him the citation. I asked them to please not take him because I was alone with the children and had recently had surgery. I raised my blouse so they could see. They told me to stay out of it.

Santa's husband was arrested as a preemptive social dangerousness measure, despite the fact he worked at the Naval Hospital. She assures me that he had committed no crime. Santa said she received a citation six months later. She was accused of contempt, for having disrespected the police, for which she served six months. When she got out on parole, her mother had taken her daughter to another daughter's home, Santa's sister's house, because she'd been sleeping on the street.

**Santa:** But, it is a very small house, and families get along best at a distance. But when there are children... More over if there are 12 people living in one place.

There's no upstairs and downstairs. There are 12 in one little space. You can go to the Casablanca neighborhood. The neighbors are there, and they can tell you that this is all true. Some of them helped my mother. She and I slept on the street, at bus stops, in hallways. Once we even got water dumped on us. Kirenia caught a staph infection and was in the hospital for four months. They didn't think she'd make it.



*Albergue children*

*The neighbors made us a tiny room*

**Kirenia:** My parents separated when I was two; my mother got together with my stepfather, my younger brother's father. My stepfather is white and his family is very racist. They wanted nothing to do with my mother. My mother lived in Regla, but went to live with him in Casablanca, where she built a little wooden house next door to her mother-in-law's house. Yet, many of the folks don't own their homes there, because it is an unhealthy location. They've lived there for 20 or 30 years without owning the homes.

Once, they [the authorities] said that anyone with indoor plumbing would get a ration booklet and a right to own his or her home. But my stepfather's mother never allowed my mother to build a bathroom. We had to use the sister-in-law's bathroom, or urinate in a can, or do our business on a piece of paper and then throw it out, sometimes in my stepfather's mother's cesspit.



*Santa's bathroom*

Kirenia has no good memory of him: "He mistreated my mother a lot. The scars on my forehead are from his nails, which I would frequently dig into me."

**Kirenia:** After my mother had been in jail for two months, her mother-in-law tells my grandmother to give her my little brother, so she wouldn't have the trouble of dealing with both of the children. She told her that she was her grandmother, in any event, and that she lived next door. My grandmother never thought she meant any harm, and gave him to her. Two days later, she told my grandmother that she and I had to leave the place. We had been there 11 years,

and my mother was even paying the CDR (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution) dues.

She said we had to leave because that place belonged to her, and her son, my stepfather, who was in jail, had authorized her to evict us. My grandmother said she wasn't leaving and we didn't, but we had no food. A few days later, my grandmother told me: 'I'm going to get up early to go to your aunt's house, in Lawton, and bring back some food; don't let anyone in. I'll be back very soon.'

She'd get up at five and be back by nine. It seems they were watching her. Suddenly, someone wakes me up, saying: 'Get up! We're going to tear this down.' When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was the sky. A plainclothesman and a uniformed police officer called Mendilusa forcefully removed me. He was the unit chief in Regla. They put all my mother's possessions in the middle of the alley. I can take you to Casablanca, if you like, so you can see all this is true. All the neighbors there love me. I had to sleep at neighbors' homes; eat there, and at work centers. As far as I am concerned, that was an eviction. They opened a case for us at the Municipal Housing Authority (DMV) stating we were a social case, because we had no home. I have been waiting for 21 years for the case to be resolved. I remember we'd go to the DMV and spend hours and hours. Since it had a cafeteria, they feed us lunch and dinner. Later, a neighbor (may God have her in His glory) gave us a section of her

patio to build a little room. Using cardboard, zinc, boards, and sheets, all the neighbors built us a room. We stayed there until the DMV gave us this *albergue* cubicle.

**YR:** You told me you had tried to get the TV folks to come.

**Kirenia:** One day, I went to the local government's headquarters and saw a TV vehicle parked there, just by chance. I asked them what channel they were from, like I did with you, and they told me they were from "*Papelito habla.*" I told them my situation and they gave me an address; they told me not to forget to go, but the truth is... They [the authorities] gave us this room right away. I think they saw me talking to the TV people and worked fast. In any event, I went to see Mariela Castro with all my papers. I did not speak to her personally, but her people told me to await a reply. That was when someone from the National Assembly involved with construction and such came, a tall, black man. I saw him personally. I told him my story; he asked me if I was Kirenia. That's when I knew he had come on my account.

**YR:** So you were both seen and taken care of.

**Kirenia:** Yes, but not properly. At first, they told us that our case had been closed, which can only be done in one of two situations: if I had received housing from them, or if I had improved my situation. Neither had happened. When they went to Casablanca and saw the room with no bathroom, and its earthen floor, they realized that was I had been

saying was true and never did close the case. They may have given the housing to someone, anyone.

The cubicle consisted of a small, square room, perhaps measuring a couple of meters. It had no kitchen, but at least it had an indoor bathroom. Her son made the kitchen table/counter. That small space should house beds for Santa, Kirenia, and a newborn child, in addition to furniture, a TV, and a refrigerator. They had only one bed to use, and the only place for it to go would get wet.

Kirenia received a few pieces of pine. "Some are even termite ridden, I think," says Santa. Her son managed to make the loft with them, to make for a bit more space. But they are very thin, and should not be walked on too much. Santa doesn't sleep up there now, because of the excessive humidity. There is a crack on the wall, and water comes in. The mattress that was on the bed got wet, and got ruined. She sleeps below, on a blanket. Her younger son is now with her, but I see that Santa's conditions are not so bad: she has a refrigerator, television, washer, etc.

**Santa:** I paid the TV off through a payment plan. My sister who lives abroad bought me the refrigerator. When it got old, I was able to exchange it for that one, which I am still paying off. My sister who lives in Norway bought me the washer. When she comes, she takes care of us, but she doesn't send anything.

Santa works at a sort of visitor house where judicial functionaries from Regla, Guanabacoa, and Old Havana stay. They



come from other provinces to work in Havana, and stay at this place. Santa is the General Assistant there and takes care of cleaning the various rooms, and serving lunch and dinner.

### ***Social cases with no ration booklet***

While they have spent over five years at this *albergue*, they've had a ration booklet for less than one. When they were living in the little room in the neighbor's patio, they survived by buying things on the street and thanks to neighbors, "who helped us quite a lot," says Kirenia. "Many times, we did not eat," whispers Santa.

To get a ration booklet, Kirenia went to the Provincial Shelter Authority. There, she was told that there was nothing they could do, because social cases were not assigned ration booklets. The OFICODA office said the same thing.



### ***Albergue inner hallway***

**Kirenia:** I then WENT to the Provincial, People's Power Assembly and delivered a letter for the legal advisor there. They sent me to another office, and the girl there sent me to the Interior Commerce Ministry (MINCIN). I went there and explained my problem and showed them the letter for the People's Council Vice

President. The comrade who took care of me told me to expect an answer within 30-60 days. Approximately 20 days later, I got a call to go pick up a ration booklet. See how things are possible? One must put pressure on them.

**YR:** Under what circumstances have you had your daughters?

**Kirenia:** I started to work at the Regla Library, and it was there I met the father of my 10 and 7 year-old daughters, and there's a boy on the way.

They are not together, but since the cubicle is so small, and his house is "a little bit bigger," she is there with the girls. This latest pregnancy was an accident; the condom busted, but even though there is a baby on the way, they are not a couple. When I asked her if he helps her, she says that "he buys the girls what they need; they lack nothing." She gets help from her mother. Kirenia says she is five months along and has not even a baby diaper, or any baby items, on hand. Today, she went to see how much was deposited in her account: 88 pesos and 36 cents (less than four CUCs = less than four US dollars).

When she'd finished high school, Kirenia finished her degree to be a pre-school teacher, which is what she does now. She really loves children and has patience with them. She earns 375 pesos a month (the equivalent of 15 CUCS and 15 cents = \$15.15 in US dollars).

**YR:** Aren't you entitled to a baby layette?

**Kirenia:** After 28 weeks; I am not at 23. They say they're providing a crib, mattress, mosquito netting...

**Santa:** Not giving. You have to buy them.

**Kirenia:** Yes. For 140 pesos.

**YR:** Yes, but should realize that the price is subsidized. 140 pesos for all that...

Kirenia corrects me. The 140 pesos are for the crib only. In any event, it is very little, compared to what a crib could cost her on the market.

**Kirenia:** The prices are not the problem; the problem is that you don't get anything. I did not get a crib for my eldest, and I had to buy it at full price.

Santa and Kirenia have been at this location for nearly six years. Others living at the *albergue* have been there for many more, by comparison.

#### **When will it be our turn?**

**YR:** Have you thought of some way of solving the problem, about alternatives for getting out of here? If there are folks who have been here long, they will probably have priority when a possibility of housing comes up.

**Santa:** There are folks who have been here longer but when offered a house they've turned it down. Instead of giving to someone else in the same *albergue*, they give it to someone in Old Havana, in the Bahía *albergue*.

**YR:** Maybe those people have been there longer than you have, which makes that fair.

**Santa:** Yes, maybe so. But as long as the folks who have been here longer than us get a house, we won't, and neither will the others. When will it be our turn? I requested a place or plot at the DMV, so

I can build a little house, all on my own, little by little, even if it's a wooden one.

One cannot even think of building one made of cement blocks. How much would it cost us? I earn 275 pesos a month and my refrigerator payment is discounted from that. I have asthma, have two herniated disks, and need to buy medication. The idea of requesting credit at a bank frightens me, because I have to pay it back with interest.

**YR:** How about a subsidy?

**Santa:** It is my understanding that social cases don't receive subsidies. Land, yes, but you have to build on your own.



**Kirenia and Santa**

#### ***Going from sleeping on a sofa to sleeping in a bed***

Santa takes me to the home of another neighbor who agrees to talk to me. Vivian, who is 61 years old, has been living at the *albergue* for 11 years. As I enter her cubicle, I realize the conditions are much better than those at Santa's, however she immediately clarifies for me that her husband is responsible for everything that's been done there. She had various health issues before entering the *albergue*. They have been getting worse here because of the lack of ventilation, and because she smokes. She

had a stroke, and her husband and son had it tough getting her down the loft stairs. Now she sleeps below, on the sofa.

The house where she used to live, in Casablanca, prior to coming to this Regla *albergue*, was part of a two-story building that was deteriorating. The floors started to warp; then, finally, came the collapses. The house was no longer habitable; she and her family were registered as *albergue* dwellers, but in reality never went one because there was no room. So they kept on living in that house for years. The collapse of the neighboring house opened a gaping hole in the wall, with a beam. It could have killed the neighbor's son, if he'd been in his crib. "The crib was destroyed." From that point on, they wrote to the State Council, and went to the Provincial Shelter Administration. "We took all the necessary steps, but no one listened."

Upon seeing their situation, a neighbor who worked there looked for something. They were living there only because no one had gone to remove the rubble; neighbors had to get together and do it. Her neighbor was sent elsewhere.

Santa adds that other *albergue* dwellers told her that they used to receive donations, which Vivian confirmed: "They'd give clothing, but I haven't seen anymore since Santa has been living here."

**Vivian:** As you can see, everyone here gets wet, on one side or the other. The pipes are clogged. I used to call, and the brigades would come and unclog them, but these pipes can't take that anymore,

because they are too old. They need to be replaced. There are residents here who do not get water. I have a spigot in my bathroom, but I don't get water from it. When we came here, and there was still no loft, the water would drain and drip, because the gutter was slanted. My husband got up there and fixed it. Now, after Wednesday's downpour (April 29<sup>th</sup>), the leaking drips on my 32-year old son's bed. He lives with us. Our bed is upstairs, as is our son's.

**Santa:** Water got in through my roof and floor, due to that huge downpour.

Other neighbors tell me that water got into their rooms, too. Due to her illnesses, as a special case, they promised Vivian to take her out of the *albergue* and move her to a better place. "May God intervene, so I can stop sleeping on the sofa and be able to sleep in my own bed for the short or long time I have left." Her neighbors' situation is alarming, and Vivian wishes that they, too, could solve their housing situations. "There are many children here, and we must look out for their well being." A week later, when I went back to the *albergue* with a photographer, I learned that Vivian had become upset by her conversation with me, and she no longer wanted to talk about her situation or be photographed.

### ***I am an extreme social case***

Alina Margarita Rodríguez is another *albergue* dweller that has lived there for 21 years. When I enter her cubicle, I have no choice but to sit with her on a bed, the only piece of furniture, which

also takes up most of the room's space, hardly a meter from the bathroom.



*Alina Margarita and her granddaughter*

**Alina:** I am an extreme social case. My 21-year old son has a dual heart problem and is epileptic, asthmatic, and has issues due to respiratory failure. Despite all that, he became a wonderful mechanic, for our society. He is a level C mechanic; he learned by watching.

**YR:** They haven't given you a house in 21 years?

**Alina:** In December, they offered a house in Robles, but because we're seven people, I can't go, because I have to give part of it to my daughter.

**YR:** Seven people live in here?

**Alina:** My daughter and her child live next door. My other daughter and her

husband live down over there. My son and I live here.

The Robles house has three rooms for seven people. Each family would be in one room. She would continue sharing a room with her son. They'd sleep in the same bed, because there is no room for another, like now. Or, one of the two would sleep in the living room, but her daughter wants to have her stuff separate, and she understands.

**YR:** Wouldn't it have been better to take that house and later try to switch it?

**Alina:** I already told you. If we sold it, how much would I give each member of the family? These homes cannot be sold for much. And, as far as switching housing, Robles is quite far, at the old Guanabacoa stop.

**YR:** Had they offered you a house before?

**Alina:** Never.

**YR:** How do you hope to solve this problem?

**Alina:** The DMV comrade says that they are going to give me two small apartments: one for my daughter and her little girl, and my other daughter and her husband, and another one for my son and me. Under those conditions, I will leave here. I am struck by the fact there is no loft and she confesses to me that it had been her fault.

**YR:** Doesn't it get wet when it rains?

**Alina:** My bed got wet during this past downpour we had.

**And I'd die for Cuba**

Alina asks me where the pictures I am taking will be published and is happy

that they will be in the article we'll publish on the Internet.

**Alina:** Anything you guys can include that will be of benefit to us, do. After all, reality is reality. I am not a counterrevolutionary and I'd die for Cuba, honestly, but reality is reality. If I live with seven people, why can't I be offered an option?



### *Alina Margarita's cubicle*

Alina confessed to me that her relationship with her neighbors is not the best, but my interviewees all seem to have something in common, something in addition to the precarious life they share in this *albergue*: their support for what we call the revolution.

Vivian stated that she couldn't do anything, unfortunately. She did when she could. She has even gotten laurels from the CDR. Santa got her TV (which she had to pay in installments) when the CDR was still granting them. She did all the watches for the CDR, went to the Plaza, everything...

**Alina:** One must say what one feels. All the neighbors got together and wrote a letter to Canal Habana because all the

pipes were all clogged and we were not getting any water from our taps. That was last year. They told us they have no budget; that there's no money.

Alina tells me that she won the TV "by the sweat of her brow," through her work center. She was a messenger for the People's Assembly, and never once did they offer her one via the CDR, not even considering her sick son. Alina was also a pre-school teacher for many years, but now works as a custodian.

**Alina:** Once a child was trying to escape the pre-school, on account of an aide, and I jumped to catch him so he wouldn't hurt himself. I broke my arm; it had to be put in a cast. When they took off the cast, the skin was quite fragile, and they had to brush paraffin on it. Yet, it was too hot when they did it and ended up giving me third degree burns. That's why they decided to switch me over a custodian job. I'm better, because it's right across the street from where I live, but salary is not much.

Her brothers, Manuel and Luís Roca Agredo, live in the United States, but Alina hasn't heard from them in a long time. She hopes they read this journal and can get in touch with her.

### **I am not going to be paid for the interview**

The first time I was at the *albergue* with the NPR crew, the people I saw, that I was able to speak to, were black women. I had the impression that everyone who lived there was an Afro-descendent. I was wrong. There are 21 cubicles in the *albergue*, and according to Santa, "there

is a woman who is white living back there, and another young man who is also white; the person in the very first house is also white, but everyone else is black.”



*Entryway to the albergue*

Another neighbor showed us her home and explained her situation. This time, when Santa and Kirenía told her that I’d come back to write about the people living there, she answered that she was not interested in telling us anything: “She says she is not going to be paid for the interview,” Kirenía informs me. Far from being bothered by it, I decided she was right. I am not going to pay her, but I also can’t guarantee that this interview will have some positive impact on the lives of these folks. How many people will read it, and what will it mean to them? I don’t know. All I know is that realities such as this one cannot wait for a time when there is freedom of the press, expression, and association in Cuba. And even those achievements will not be enough for these people to be able to escape the precarious conditions in which they live.



*Entry to Santa's house*



*Albergue children*

# *A Life with No Insurance*

Natividad Soto Kessel

Chemical engineer and ceramicist

Havana, Cuba



I left home early in the morning, to buy my ration book bread, a round loaf that fits in the palm of my hand, is sometimes undercooked, other times sour, containing a small stone. It is always short on shortening or lard, and is often blackened on one side, or tastes like tin. Despite all this, I go buy it, toast it a bit in a pan, and eat it, when the bite of hunger awakens me in the middle of the night. If not, then it becomes my breakfast, which was why I went out to buy it in the first place. Upon awakening, my thoughts traveled to the

past. I remembered the worried look on the faces of the folks who waited outside the bakery. There was uncertainty in that look; they were losing hope. Hours earlier, they had been assured that the bread would be ready by 6PM, but it wasn't. Intent on calming us, the shop employee told them that the manager would be there till 9PM to sell bread to those ready to buy it, and also offered us the option of buying it the next day. The second option was better for me. The employee expressed some doubt. If they had not been able to meet the quota for

one day, how would they be able to produce enough bread for two days in one? Upon leaving, I saw a young child crying in his mother's arms; he wanted to eat bread. I also left behind a father tired of walking back and forth, who eventually sat down inside the bakery intent upon leaving the place with bread in hand. His shoulders were slumped and one could see weariness in his face. This is why I went early. It was not only one roll that I should receive; now it was two. As I left my home, I found the neighborhood plunged in silence, a simulated silence that tried to make us think that all the apartments were empty because their inhabitants had gone to the plaza. That was the idea, for everyone to believe that there was no one home. 'Simulation' is precisely the right word here because everyone was working on his or her own, independently, but in a synchronized manner, with a common goal, so no one could question their revolutionary integrity, which anyone would have if they did not go to the parade at the plaza. This is why they all remained silent in the carefully shuttered homes. I bumped into Ada's sister on the way to the bakery; she is an old woman who sits near the market every day, from Monday to Friday, selling sweets, so she can help out with her family's budget. She was exhausted. When I saw her, I greeted her with a 'good morning' and asked about her sister. Her response shocked me: "Ada is at the plaza!" But, "why?" Ada, who is retired, and gets up early every day to make the sweets she later sells in different ways, along with

her two sisters, to help make ends meet at home. She sometimes has serious health issues, lots of pain in her joints and bones, and had to pay dearly for medical tests, so a doctor could diagnose her. She also takes him gifts the days his clinic is open, to ensure good treatment. So, what is she doing at the Plaza? I went on my way and arrived at the bakery, bought the bread and then continued on to the pharmacy. As I went by the market, I saw a line of people waiting to buy some of the chicken they began to sell after the plaza parade was over. The market must remain closed during these events; except for bread, no other products may be sold. While on my way back home, I thought about the motives that made these folks march at the Plaza. Once home, I turned on the radio; I wanted to understand what was going on, so I concentrated on listening to the news report. The journalists from Cuban radio and television just kept repeating slogans and talking about the population's unanimous support for the ever improving economic model, socialism's triumphs, for the Venezuelan cause, etc. I turned the dial to tune into *Radio Reloj*; its announcers were repeating the very same slogans and reporting on what some interviewed workers had said during the march, who had explained their reasons for going to the Plaza. They also talked about what was going on in other countries and how workers there expressed their demands.

### *Demands*

Supplication. Request. Question. A legal action that validates a right. I heard that



workers in France were demanding raises and a right to dignified work. Didn't workers in Cuba have demands, too? A people who spend more than 8 hours a day wondering what they are going to cook, not because of all the options they have, but quite the contrary. Food items are expensive while salaries are low, for the most part. I am talking about millions of people, about working people that you see talking on the street, on buses, on lines, all over the place. It is impossible to live under such disadvantageous conditions, with depressed salaries and a cost of living that is rising each and every day. Those food items one gets through the ration booklet cover one daily meal for only 10 days in a month. Where are breakfast, lunch *and* dinner? If you have lunch, then you don't dinner. I am referring to the family food allotment, the food our government guarantees workers. Its intention is to cover each person's nutritional needs with 7 pounds of white rice, 10 ounces of beans (black, red or chick peas), 3 pounds of refined sugar, 1 pound of raw sugar, 1 pound of frozen chicken, 11 ounces of frozen chicken instead of fish, half a pound of *jamonada* [processed ham] or ground soy protein (which is really soy mixed with the skin and other parts of other meats), 5 eggs, 500 grams of salt (for three months), 24 ounces of coffee mixed with chick pea (or chick pea with coffee), and 400 grams of spaghetti every two or three months. They call these subsidies because their cost per person does not exceed 15 pesos a month, but only cover

10 days at the rate of one meal a day [1 Cuban Peso = @ \$ 0. 38]. Well, what about the other 20 days? One has to buy products at a much higher price. For someone to have lunch and dinner the rest of those days—consuming only rice, black beans, eggs and cooking oil—it costs 428 pesos (@\$16) a month. Let's not even talk about fruits and vegetable, or dairy products, or much less cereals. They are all out of reach for Cuban workers. Here is a sample list of prices: 1lb guavas, 5 pesos; 1lb papaya, 3 pesos; 1 bunch of kale, 5 pesos; 1 head of lettuce, 5 pesos; 1lb green peppers, 10 pesos, 1lb of carrots, between 5-10 pesos; 1 head of cabbage, 10 pesos. How many times a month might one be able to have these essential, nutritious items, so important for one's health and that of one's family, on the table? So, I don't understand. Why don't we have demands? Cuban workers don't demand that the price of food be commensurate with their low salaries, or better education for their children; they don't talk about their housing needs, despite the fact that most of the Cuban population lives in crowded conditions, many of them in deplorable, subhuman conditions. When are we going to talk about public health and transportation, the right of every human being to have access to food, and the right to be able to purchase it with a proper salary, in order to have a decent standard of living? When are we going to talk about the right to work in proper working conditions and receive snacks and lunches that renew the energy we spend

while working? When are we going to talk about the right to use our salaries to buy proper shoes that don't hurt our backs? To summarize, the demands are so many.

### ***Who marches in the Plaza?***

What's going on? What did the people who went to the *Plaza de la Revolución* go there to do? What are the victories they are affirming? What is this economic model they support all about, and what do they say is improving about it? Who marched? University students have to go, because if they don't, they can face enormous difficulties, such as losing their scholarship. Doctors go because they are part of the most favored working group; they have a business office that coordinates their travel abroad. This allows them to contribute to the economy totally convertible currency and also bring back products they cannot purchase with their Cuban salaries despite the fact they've received raises twice. Commercial sector employees also attend; these are the folks who batter ordinary consumers by selling products, even food, at prices that are fixed in a way that always makes consumers end up suffering. Just as the '5 Heroes' and their wives, who travel the world over thanks to the toil of Cuban workers, those people who march are those who say they "struggle," which means: anyone the government drags out of work centers that produce products they later sell illegally. Others who go are employed at companies that are mixed in nature, or rising ones, because

if they don't, they lose benefits they gain so long as they meet production goals. There are more who go: according to *Radio Reloj*, hundreds of thousands go, although that number is far smaller than the number of people who attended the popular gatherings of 70s, 80s, and 90s. People are very weary, less afraid and, above all, quite downtrodden. This lack of hope leads us to think that our only solution lies outside Cuba, which is why many young and not so young people emigrate. Not one single, ordinary citizen believes that there is any chance of improvement here in Cuba. One sees lots of depression, sad faces, notable aggression, and very few smiles. People say: "What can we do, if there is nothing more?"

### ***The health crisis***

Primary health care in Cuba is no guarantee for anyone. Most medical clinics have structural problems; for this very reason, some were abandoned while others keep functioning, but only at half their capacity. There is great instability among medical personnel and one sees long lines at clinics. People are aware of their family doctors' limitations and seek out specialists at hospital centers through friends, or persuasion and patience, sometimes offering gifts and cash. Odontology clinics do not offer regular service. Sometimes they lack even the cotton, water and paper necessary to sterilize their instruments. Between April and May, it took me 46 days to cure a molar because they lacked the gloves with which to work on me. The

clinic's sub-director told me that if I procured the gloves, they would offer me the service I required. There are restrictive regulations. One is assigned the hospital center for one's treatment according to the municipality in which one lives. If that hospital's equipment is broken, one has to wait till it is repaired, because no other hospital will take you, unless you have friends with a certain degree of connections, money or prestige in the mass media. Medical exams are not enough for an adequate diagnosis, especially at those hospital centers that serve the ordinary public. Most treatments are by trial and error. A correct diagnosis almost always comes about after the problem has become chronic. The possibilities of preventive medicine are no more than a statistic. There is always talk about how low our infant mortality rates are; this is one of the statistics most often mentioned in speeches. Yet, cases of cancer, diabetes, and other degenerative diseases among children are on the rise.

***The social wear and tear, and gratuities***

The truth is that old folks depend on their families to survive, even if they get a retirement pension. Why? Because their pensions are not robust enough to cover even basic needs. This is why one sees old people selling peanuts, handmade candies and other products they procure, sometimes illegally, on the street, near stores and bus stops. They stand on long lines at markets to buy their food and are often not enrolled in senior center programs, at continued education programs for seniors, or

enjoying the fruits of their long work lives. Members of this generation of workers who are now part of the retired class, those who lived during the early times of the Cuban revolution, explain that back when they received their salaries, they would also receive a paper receipt indicating different discounts they would be entitled to—free medical care and education, as well as a retirement pension and other subsidies. They say that the now expired union leader Lázaro Peña even proposed that such notifications were unnecessary: that the discounts should be applied automatically. From that moment on, workers ceased being aware of the fact that they contributed to the covering of these social expenses and the saving of money for secure retirements throughout their entire working lives. Since then, workers have no idea what their gross salary is, and receive a net salary, and nothing more. Yet, that was not enough. After Fidel Castro gave a particular speech, wage taxes were imposed; all workers employed at companies involved in *Perfeccionamiento empresarial* [Enterprise Optimization] and joint venture companies must pay them. Only workers whose salaries are part of a local government's fixed budget don't have to pay them. So, are public education and healthcare free? There are signs at hospitals and clinics that read: "Your healthcare is free, but there is a price." Here are some sample prices for medical services: a primary care visit, 25.32\$; a referral, 32.50\$ (1 CUC = 26.5 CUPs). I have worked for

19 years and have two university degrees. The salaries I have received for my professional work have been so low that their total is 64494.12\$, essentially 2687,26 CUCs. Enough said.

# *Reflections of a Cuban Teacher*

Caridad Tello

Primary Teacher, Centro Habana

Havana, Cuba

I have been a teacher by vocation and profession for 55 years. When I was a child, my favorite game was to teach lessons to dolls or other little girls; I dreamt of being a teacher when I grew up, a desire that was fueled by three aunts, all excellent normal school teachers, and support from my parents, who stimulated my interest. So, I became a teacher. At this point in my life, after 12 years of retirement, I continue working on a contracted basis, even at 73 years of age. I feel happy about still being able to teach. I have

taken part in all the educational transformations in Cuba since 1959: a literacy campaign, adult education, scholarships, educational improvements, program accreditations, and others. Currently, and for the past few years, Cuban education has been going through a crisis due to classroom teachers shortage, whose effects can be seen at all levels, and not only in the capital. The country has gone through it all. The State has tried to solve this sad situation via diverse, ill-conceived measures, among them:

- The training of emerging teachers for primary school teaching and teaching computing. Only a minute percentage of them actually end up in the classroom when they finish their university studies; most of them go to other jobs.
- The existence of fulltime, general studies teachers in secondary education who have also not been stable.
- The contracting of professionals from other fields to offer other classes at pre-college and technological institutes.

None of these attempts to find a solution has solved the problems of a teacher shortage in our schools. Another strategy has been to incorporate adjuncts and

teaching assistants in classrooms as teachers, through special courses and help from experienced teachers. The results have been bad, since few of them

become real teachers or educators. Most of them are young people who have interrupted their studies after completing ninth grade or in transitioning to pre-college or tech school. Others study at the peasant worker's school to make it up to twelfth grade. They do not end up working at schools by vocation, but rather to solve their own, temporary, economic problems. Many of them practice inadequate social behavior, utilize incorrect language, show a lack of responsibility, and reveal instability. If they are not properly prepared for life, how can they educate our children, according to José Martí's maxim: "to educate is to prepare a man for life." To develop a vocation for teaching, there is a focus on fomenting interest in teaching in fifth and sixth grade. In this initiative, children do different activities, teach classes, prepare teaching methodology, and study the lives of great Cuban teachers. These students continue participating in these interest groups during their secondary school years, year after year, but the result is the same: the proposed goal of incorporating them into education schools is not met. The situation is quite similar with the students who do finish pre-college: few of them apply to teaching careers. Of those students who do go into teaching via any one of the aforementioned initiatives, few have distinguished themselves scholastically and have chosen the career because it is not academically demanding. In addition, if those students who do get high grades lean towards teaching careers, many lack

parental support, since they don't want their children to be teachers. Cuba's educational problems are difficult and will continue to be so. Teachers are increasingly expected to excel in their classes, but barely have time to prepare themselves; they are expected to have more commitment, but the work is exhausting. The conditions are not adequate, but quality inspections, reviews and controls are constant. Generally, the work day for a Cuban teacher starts at 7:50AM; he or she teaches the classes assigned to them and does shifts in so-called special subjects: library, computers, English, or physical education. In addition to this, they must also coach sports because there are not enough Phys. Ed. specialists, or they are absent. There aren't many of these specialists, so teachers have to take on that load and keep working with the students. They take them to the cafeteria and watch them at their break. At 2PM, they continue with obligatory or non-assigned activities till 4:20PM. After that, they generally face transit issues and get home to start on their second jobs—dealing with everyday challenges and shortages. They are required to do no fewer than 12 hours per week of self-preparation, but they are filled with papers, handouts, and instructions. Teachers don't really have this time, which affects the quality of their classes and causes many to leave the profession for other jobs. The situation is truly critical. We think that a change is necessary. If we are to revive and strengthen teaching as a vocation,

we must value teachers for the job they do: forming and educating. They must receive a salary with which they can improve their lives. Many teachers live in deplorable conditions. As if all this weren't enough, when teachers finish their studies they receive a work evaluation. Their school's leadership prepares this. If it is good (B for *bueno*), this means a monetary incentive equivalent to 100 *pesos* (4 CUCs). If it is very good (MB for *muy bueno*), it is 200 *pesos* (8 CUCs). As far as vacation is concerned, it is better to say nothing at all, since it is probably easy to imagine what they entail. Many retired teachers have once again entered classrooms for two fundamental reasons: to improve our economic situation, since what we get for retirement after so many years of working is not enough to live on, and to contribute to a profession we love and to which we have devoted the better part of our lives. The current situation pains us. But we won't be around forever. The current, precarious, economic situation and difficulties regarding education have brought forth a new opportunity for self-employment: to be a reviewer (a tutor), a teacher who goes to homes and tutors children who do their homework and also work in difficult subjects, all this after a full work day. Many retired teachers have also begun to do this. It is better for those who can't work the long hours at a real school and have found some other form of subsistence. Unfortunately, these are not always well trained or up-to-date on the subject they teach. Often, it is just a person after an

economic end, and since there is not a set price for these reviews, sometimes they charge excessively. Many parents get reviewers for their children due to the instability of teachers at schools and the poor quality of their classes. We should recall that many who give classes are not teachers. Yet, some parents hand their children over to reviewers and then don't follow up with them or confirm at their children's schools how their children are doing academically, saying they don't have time to pay attention to their children's individual study hours and homework. The result is a poor level of learning, but worse yet is the fact that parents unethically offer teachers gifts to ensure that their children get promoted or improve their grades. One needs knowledge and a will to give of one's self to do quality teaching. One needs vocation to teach and educate, as well as a large dose of love that is only possible if one loves what one does: "to educate is a work of infinite love." I ask myself while feeling very worried and deep pain: "What will become of education in Cuba? When will all our classrooms be filled with teachers who teach due to their vocation, because they love the profession?"

# *The New Mavericks*

Armando Soler Hernández

Journalist

Havana, Cuba

*The world's greatest evil  
is not poverty of the have-nots,  
but rather the oblivion of the haves.*

J. Lebret

**T**hey live like furtive, anonymous urbanites, hidden amongst the multitude. They are economic renegades, like the feisty, street-smart blacks of yore, during the colonial era, as if hiding from their owners. Unlike those runaway slaves of the Havana mangroves who became delinquents, these contemporary ones work, but removed from the State's obsessive vigilance and control over work in Cuba. They found a way to earn a living honestly and, above all, in complete freedom. Sugar mills, their professional talents, and daily audacity allow them to find a space and survive not only outside the "Big Brother is watching you" phenomenon, but also completely unknown and undetectable to the State's zealous control. Their reasons are many, but all really boil down to one: they consider that they have been defrauded. They believe they gave too much of their lives in exchange for ever diminishing salaries that were unrealistic in terms of constant (and officially never

mentioned) inflation, shortages, and a motive for corruption.

## *El Fígaro*

When we meet by chance, Fígaro's small and very clear, blue eyes shine; they are even paler next to his brick-colored skin that reeks of early morning drinking. "I stopped working for these people (the State) 25 years ago. I am now 72. I graduated from the University with a degree in economics. If I ever got anything from it, it was being able to calculate that the country was falling economically short, and would not improve in the future.<sup>1</sup> Now tell me I was wrong." He makes a sweeping gesture with his hand, possibly including in it the enormous pile of garbage on the shady park's corner. From a starred bag he extracts a pair of barber's scissors, and shows them to me: "This was what gave me my independence. It was during the Special Period, at its height, and some started to leave their State jobs and try to do something out on the street.



Up to that moment, I would spend my free time cutting hair, for my kids, brothers, friends and even neighbors—and never charged them a dime. Some insisted and did pay me. That’s when I asked myself: “why don’t I do this for a living?” That’s how I started, first with the idea I’d open a barber shop in my front porch, adapting any old chair to a spinning base, like those old barber chairs one sees all over the place. You know, do it legitimately! But a friend told me that doing that would make the police or any inspectors focus on me. At that time, after the 1986 Rectification of the Cuban economy, and after the “Beard” (Fidel Castro) said ‘we [were] now really going to build socialism’, it became rare for someone to work legally outside the State. No. It was not like now, when it is much more common. This was why I did not go through any motion to do it legally. What for? Just to stick out and become an automatic target for the police? No way!” He downs a drink from a glass shot glass he extracts from the very same bag. Upon my refusing a share of his liquor, he puts it away and ends our conversation by saying: “That’s why I started riding my bike around Havana. I would cut hair in different neighborhoods, discreetly, in private homes. Since I do it well, the way folks like, my client base started to grow! Now I just walk around and limit my work to my neighborhood vendors. Sometimes I can’t keep up! I also have kids who want their hair done in some contemporary fashion. What I charge for each haircut is half of what is charged at

barbershops, and with me, they don’t have to wait in line!”

### *Idleness and dangerousness*

It seems that few in Cuba remember the absolute control the Cuban State had over the island’s entire workforce. Its formal totalitarian origin came about in the 70s, when the sinister, Law 1231 “against idleness” was decreed. Not having a job was once again punished via prison sentences. Furthermore, nearly 100% of employment opportunities were with the State. Later on, continued repressive policies turned into something akin to the Nazi practice of “preventive arrest.” The concept “pre-criminal, social dangerousness” allowed the State to make people do jail time “before committing a crime.” Thus, many people who prefer not working for the State are considered habitually lazy and prone to engage in criminal activity. They were punished by being sentenced to arbitrary sentences to be served at work farms or provincial prisons. The terror invoked by this strict application of the law took shape through burgeoning work details, something that ended up being unsustainable after the Soviet subsidies disappeared.

### *The retiree*

Arturo trusts me enough to tell me that he retired as a worker when I reached the work age limit in the early years of the new century: “ I had be stewing on the inside for many years. I did not want to be working for the State.

What they paid me was never enough! But I have a family, and I also dared not leave my job, because I was afraid to lose my pension. I don't know why! That crappy pension hardly does me any good!"

Despite his age, he hangs on to a not so recommendable habit: smoking tobacco. He doesn't even stop doing while he is changing his client's *pesos* into coins at the Palatino bus stop, in the El Cerro neighborhood. He charges 20 cents for each *peso*, but his anxious clients, who are on their way to work, or to run some personal errand at that moment, prefer losing a twenty-coin in the transaction, than the whole *peso* to pay for public transit. When that expense adds up over a month, the sum they cannot allow themselves to lose from the meager salaries. "What I do is not legal, nor do I pay for a license or anything. That way I avoid putting myself in a position to be told on, which could bring on inspectors and the police, if I stayed at the same place all the time. Today, I'm here; tomorrow, in Old Havana; the day after, at any other intersection, but always early on account of my clientele, who are on their way to work. I have a relationship with a bank that exchanges all the *pesos* I get here for twenty-cent coins. For that good work, I pay out a little something every day." His black skin shows the sweat brought out by the summer heat, but Arturo does not seem overwhelmed by the high temperature. He stops talking to me, bent on exchanging coins with a large group of future passengers who approach him.

### ***My uncle and his job***

The creative ability to find an unexplored area in the market, and creating one's own space within it, seems to be a natural gift for Cubans. At least, that's how it appears to be in a foreign experts' report from 1950.<sup>2</sup> This may explain how in the eight years between 1944 and 1952, savings accounts in banks more than double in size: from 688.5 million to 1,662.1 million dollars.<sup>3</sup> When I share my experience with Arturo to a neighbor, he told me "that's exactly what my already dead uncle did. He was a very creative man; he was always inventing devices and items for homes." "He lived across from the Capitol, and one day noticed that the people who waited for the *camello* [industrial, articulated bus] to Alamar had to do so standing the whole time.<sup>4</sup> They had now where to sit in front of those enormous arches. So, he got the idea of making 10 or 15 wooden benches, and renting them to the long line awaiting the bus. He charged a pittance, 10 or 15 cents per bench. When the bus arrived, he'd pick them up and then start renting them again. In only one day, he'd make enough money to cover his home's basic needs. Yet, to make a long story short, one day, he was denounced to the police. His rentable benches were confiscated, fined 1,500 *pesos* for "illegal economic activity," and warned that the next time he'd go before a judge and be accused of "illicit gain!" Imagine that! He was one of those old time guys that always bragged that no one in his family had even stepped

inside a police station! The fact is that after that he started losing his spunk. He was afraid whenever she saw the police, always thinking they were going to send him to jail. He finally died of a heart attack, possibly from that continued stress.”

### ***Young people and technology***

The State’s persistence in blocking individual initiatives to earn a living and prosper has been letting up, although not quickly or broadly enough, given the daily reality of our never-ending economic crisis. The government’s official rhetoric about creating prosperity on Cuba seems a real sophism; its does not imagine ordinary citizens achieving this goal. Worse yet, now its jealous intolerance is complicated by a growing and uncontrollable influx of new communications technologies. Despite the low level of Internet connectivity in Cuba, the lowest in the hemisphere, young Cubans savvy about technology and communications seek a way to get the most out of those skills, getting into the kinds of spaces the government makes the most supreme effort to block. Leana is a young, twenty-year old, cyber specialist who works for an import company that offers a wide assortment of things. As a result of her job, she makes use of the Internet to start a novel, new, private and, of course, illegal business.<sup>5</sup> At first, she doesn’t want to talk to me. It’s her mother, an old friend of mine, who guarantees she will remain anonymous. In the end, my interest in her is to find out in which particular space within the vast, independent, and

officially unauthorized labor market this beautiful young woman has found a way to do something for herself. “The world keeps on going. No one waits for those who remain behind. And here, in Cuba, we’ve remained behind.” She looks quite seriously at me and then says: “Visa applications for different countries can now only be done through the web. I take advantage of the Internet access I have and request visas for different people. They pay me for solving their problems, and I’m not going to tell you how much. There are people like me who sell the Internet access code, who have this kind of job just for those who want to navigate on it. They are supposed to do during the wee hours, when no one from the business is here, so the unauthorized access cannot be detected. Yet, there have been a few problems. I know of the case of a friend of mine who was employed doing the same thing I do at another company. He was found out, accused, lost his job and is now awaiting trial. I risk myself this way because it is only once in a while, and much less detectable. I also do it with a cover up, because I give my section boss some money every month. That way I avoid a very unpleasant surprise, at least at the section level, which is at least something.” Felipe<sup>6</sup> is another case of someone who has unauthorized, economic independence in the area of modern communications. A relatively young man, and professor at a technological university, he devotes his free time to adjusting, cleaning, and repairing privately owned photocopiers.

He lacks a license for this sort of work because the State authorities and bureaucracy will not accept that such a job, just like so many others, exists. Meanwhile, Felipe doesn't delay and earns his money doing honest, technological work. It comes with guarantees and is absolutely undetectable by zealous inspectors, police officials, or bureaucrats who pursue these "illegal economic activities." Simply put, not everyone limits him or herself to starting just a croquette or pizza shop, or to selling peanuts on the corner, given the calamitous state the national economy is in, and with a view to a new one far from the old, Statist model. This creates a sense that our economic reality is still totally controlled by the State and its lackeys, right down to the last letter of the law. Fortunately, it seems that will never again be the only national reality for Cubans, at least not so long as there is an economic regime that is so unfair for most.

**Notes:**

1- The May 16-22 edition of *The Economist* believes that the State salary in Cuba was 30% below the sum of a real salary, in 1989.

2- The 1943 National Census registered that 62.4% of the population between 14 and 64 years of age, was economically active, but that people who were employed in jobs that paid taxes to the State were 32% of the total (about 1,700,000 in 1950), according to an expert report by the International Reconstruction and Development Bank given to the Cuban government, on July 12, 1951. Given the low invalidity, mortality, emigration, crime, and prisoner statistics at that time, one can conclude that most were earning a living honestly in jobs in the marginal economy or through small, informal businesses.

3- *Anuario Estadístico de Cuba* (1952): 357.

4- Popular name that was given to these articulated buses, which were really trucks being used as buses, due to the shape of the two 'humps' on their roofs.

5- A cynical claim stated that "whatever is not prohibited by totalitarianism is obligatory.

6- The names that appear throughout this paper are pseudonyms, by request of the folks who agreed to tell us their experiences.

# *A View of* *Manzanillo*

Rudicel Batista

Independent journalist

Manzanillo (Granma Province), Cuba

It turns out to be quite dangerous to denounce and challenge the unrelenting forces of the State's repressive mechanisms. Viewed critically, independent journalist is the only form of journalism that is charged with bringing to light any and all information about the destruction caused by so many years of absurd and totalitarian policies. During the 1960s, Manzanillo was still a prosperous city and was assured of an even better future, but what happened was in total contradiction to that. All goods and property went to dark, dictatorial hands, which is what began a period of progressive deterioration that led to horrible chaos. For example, the *Policlínico Comunitario* (Community Hospital) is in danger of physically collapsing and sees no hope for major repairs. In all likelihood, what will happen is that it will tumble down on the city's streets and cause a loss of human life. The Hotel Casa Blanca is in the

same situation: it is filled with rubble and has been forgotten. A number of floors are threatening to collapse on its surrounding houses. This hotel used to be an attractive place where one could lodge and pay with national currency. Today, all hotels find themselves having to accept only convertible currency. In addition, popular night spots and cafés like *Brisas del Mar* and *El 1906*, known for the good service to the local population, are falling apart and no one bothers to rescue them, despite how much the population loves and wants them. The State budget has no line items for rebuilding them, nor is it motivated to repair these places. Even the Municipal Government's offices have been under repair since 2005. It seems that the long-lived, decadent Castro administration cannot pay for the damage and harm of more than a half a century of exploitation and foolishness, even for their own.



*Polyclinic on Martí and Aguilera Streets, in danger of collapsing, with its workers spread out over the entire city in small locales, or abroad helping other countries.*



*Entrance to Hotel Casa Blanca, on Loynaz and Merchán Streets.*



*View of the current local government's building, on José Miguel Gómez Street. It seems that not even time passes there.*

*Brisas del Mar, Manzanillo's malecón wall*





*Ice factory in ruins.*



*The 1906 Cafeteria.*



# *XII Biennale in Havana: Its Novelties*

Leonardo Hernández Camejo  
Independent journalist  
Havana, Cuba

**T**he Twelfth Havana Biennale concluded on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, and included no less than 300 exhibitors of contemporary art from different countries. One of its events that attracted adults and children was the ice skating rink, an unprecedented item, although they say there was once an ice rink where the Karl Marx Theatre is

today. Who would have said that with temperatures above 86 degrees Fahrenheit, on May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2015, unofficial teams from Cuba and the U.S. were going to play outdoors, on ice, at an artificial rink at the intersection of Belascoaín and Malecón, shortly after 7PM.



*The contrast*

New York artist Duke Riley, who used white, plastic-like plates, created the project: it needed to be sprayed with water and detergent every once in a while because it was exposed to the elements and across from the sea. Duke Riley participated in the game: the Cubans, who did not know him, lost 8-7, by only one point. To the delight of smiling observers, players from both groups often fell, not only for lack of practice or knowledge, but also because of the cold beers they were invited to have at the meeting. Duke brought no fewer than 200 pairs of skates and an equal number of socks: they were displayed by number and size within wooden boxes used to collect and hold items. When they were set up, they gave the impression of being shoe racks. The rink offered free recreational time to skate for 20 minutes at a time, from 5-10PM. Another novelty at the arts festival was that there were performances involving sand, parasols, and plastic easy chairs on a section of the Malecón's sidewalk at the aforementioned intersection till the tunnel entrance.

The sun was eclipsed by the joy, brotherhood, and love that bathed the Havana coast. People embraced each other, no matter where they came from or where they were going, which, perhaps, can be interpreted as a desire for peace and friendship. Yet another novelty was the number of young and adult tourists from the U.S. Fearlessly, they allow themselves to be seen at any hour, day or night, chatting with whomever they please. Something has happened! There were also regattas along the coast of Havana involving American yachts, American football games... Something is definitely up! Many are shocked by the normalcy, and the Twelfth Biennale allow all to see not only multiple artistic manifestation but also to open up to reestablishing friendly ties that never should have been broken.

# *Rethinking Negritude in Argentina Through Its Historic Moments*

Omer Freixa

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Argentina

Conservative estimates state that 9 million enslaved Africans came to the New World between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is impossible for this massive influx not to have left its mark. Afro-descendants have a very visible presence in Brazil, Colombia, and Cuba, as well as in other American nations, in smaller proportions. Yet, they have been erased from the register of historical memory in places where they are not so numerous, e.g., Argentina, Costa Rica, and Mexico. The prevailing racism of the dominant classes also embraced a presumption of whitening. Of all the countries where this was the case, Argentina is the most paradigmatic, and considers itself the region's whitest and most Europeanized nation. Although all the origin of all the Americas is tripartite (Amerindian, European, African), history has purposefully excluded Africans from the country whose capital is known as the "Paris of South America." Nevertheless, the last census (in 2010), revealed that those with black ancestry are about 2

million of the country's 40 million. With this article, I would like to clarify certain Argentine historic moments regarding or involving Afro-descendants. The lack of information about the historical events in which black, Argentine men and women were involved is noteworthy. In addition, the benchmarks that do celebrate their presence are few and quite unknown.

## *Central historic moments*

May 25<sup>th</sup> and July 9<sup>th</sup> are the central historic moments on the Argentine ceremonial calendar; they are also two of the few holidays whose date cannot be moved. Symbolically, May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1810 is understood as the birthday of the Argentine homeland, is one that is talking concretely about the nation's first government during the country's period of gestation: it was called the *Primera Junta*, and provisionally replaced the Spanish monarch Fernando VII, who was under Napoleon's yoke. This government was responsible for the destruction of the Río de la Plata Vice-

Royalty, created in 1776. On the celebration of this date, every year, school children recreate the memorable United Provinces of the Río de la Plata. Some of the young actors are white, those playing the *Primera Junta*, as are most of the audience members. Sometimes, one sees darker, black faces that occasionally play common figures, like avocado sellers, mixed-race Andeans, and sellers of other, popular products that are often consumed. Yet, for July 9<sup>th</sup>, the day independence was declared in 1816, there are no black actors. Generally, what one sees at many educational establishments are that all the actors are white. For quite a number of historians who interpreted the nation's past many decades ago, May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1810, marks the birth of the Argentine country, State, and nation. In fact, the version created by the father of official history, Bartolomé Mitre, who was President from 1862-1868, is very popular: it was key at the actual, central moment of the country's organization. His work highlighted the value of this moment as foundational for Argentina's consciousness. Yet, more recent, historical criticism explains that the birth of Argentine nationality was a process prior to 1810, and that it was constructed using a state policy that encouraged massive immigration (as a constitutive pillar of an incipient nationality), among other things, and drew foreign capital to build the infrastructure it needed to modernize. In the Argentine case, as in so many others, the State preceded nationality and not vice versa, as Mitre's

version of history initially conceived. Mitre was the first professional historian who demonstrated the existence of a nation. There was no room in his country project for blacks, something about which many of his peers forewarned him (see *IDENTIDADES* 4). As a result, the thesis of blacks as the "first to disappear" was successfully promoted; this whitening version of history, a veritable myth, is today defended, to the point that theatrical representations of this founding myth regarding July 9<sup>th</sup> is propagated at schools. The abovementioned 'explanation' became hegemonic in nature; the substance said explanation relates how black and mulatto inhabitants slowly went from constituting an important number of people, to a minority and, eventually, to be only a memory of the past. In the 1810 census, they identified 9,215 inhabitants of a total of 32,559. By 1778, the Río de la Plata's Vice-Royalty's first census shows them as 92,000 of 200,000 inhabitants, a noteworthy 46%. Yet, the 1895 national census showed only 454 blacks in a population of nearly 4 million. So the myth that there are no blacks in Argentina because they disappeared is repeated *ad nauseum* or, in any event, if there had been any, their presence is due to some vestige of a nostalgic, colonial past. The school play of what is supposed to have been Argentina's origins is nothing more than a reminder that 1810 constitutes the divide through which blackness is defined as *not* constitutive of the national, as something strange and

distant. Our country's education promotes these stereotypes, stereotypes that should be overcome. May offers another weighty and useful historical moment to elaborate upon the history of Argentine Afro-descendants. The National Constitution was approved on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1853, although unincorporated Buenos Aires (separate from the rest of the country for a decade) did not. Its Article 15 abolished slavery and automatically liberated whoever came from abroad "for the sole reason of stepping on the Republic's territory." For the first time in history, the commemoration of the Bicentennial of the first Constitutional Assembly was declared a national holiday on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013. This assembly's purpose was to declare independence and craft a constitution. Although it did not fulfill these two goals, it did decree the freedom of wombs, which is often confused with the outright abolition of slavery, which did occur 40 years later (it also decreed other popular measures, e.g., the adoption of patriotic symbols).

***Other sometimes ignored, historical moments***

One could mention the laudable efforts of Afro-descendants among the protagonists before the eventuality of the May Revolution. The English Invasions (1806-1807) brought about the benchmark events of August 12<sup>th</sup>. That day, in 1806, the defenders of the City of Buenos Aires regained control after weeks of British occupation. English General Guillermo Carr Beresford surrendered to the forces of the day's

hero, Santiago de Liniers. The day is remembered as the "Day of the Buenos Aires Re-conquest." A goodly part of the combatants were members of the Pardo and Moreno Regiments (Black and Tan Regiment), and by the end of the hostilities, sources indicate that only 70 slaves were compensated through manumission. June is a month that also contains important dates, among them the birth and death of the national flag's creator, Manuel Belgrano (June 3, 1770-June 20, 1820). When he commanded the Northern Army, General Belgrano bestowed the rank of Captain to María Remedios del Valle (or at least that is her story), a female, Afro-descendant combatant nicknamed "Mother of the Homeland." She never abandoned her superior, was just shy of being executed by firing squad, and was wounded several times. After tedious transactions and lot of time after the independence war ended on local ground, the *porteño* (Buenos Aires) government was about to give her a pension, but the fratricidal struggle at the end of 1828 plunged the paperwork into oblivion. The heroine continued in poverty and was forgotten by the country to which she had lent so much service. Despite all that, she has been remembered since 2013 with a November 8<sup>th</sup> celebration, the "National Day of Afro-Argentines and Afro Culture." Another interesting date linked directly to black Argentines is April 17<sup>th</sup>, the "Day of Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin," but this day, like the previous one, are little known. Even so, they are essential for the Afro-descendant

community, for the vindication of their collective memory. November 20<sup>th</sup>, a national holiday since 2012 known as the “Day of Sovereignty,” commemorates the epic events of 1845, the local victory in the battle of the “*Vuelta de Obligado*.” Forces under the command of then Governor Brigadier Juan Manuel de Rosas, known as the “Restorer of Laws,” fought a joint Anglo-Franco navy. Rosas imposed order during the tormented decade of 1820. He managed his subjects with iron-fisted discipline during a conflict that was increased on various fronts, during two mandates (1829-1832 and 1835-1852), and managed to get the provinces to delegate in Buenos Aires, to handle foreign affairs and declare war. The Rosas Confederation ruled the country for a bit over two decades; its leader established a privileged relationship with Afro-descendants. Many of them fought in that battle. Rosas relied on exclusively black battalions: the Argentine Guard and the Restorative Guard. The later rejection expressed by the ruling class due to their discomfort with an Argentina in which black ancestors were made so visible caused repulsion. They rejected Rosas, himself, and his many followers whose ancestry was black. We cannot leave out of this review patriot and hero *par excellence* General José de San Martín, the liberator of Argentina, Chile, and Peru, and the creator of the Regiment of Mounted Grenadiers. August 17<sup>th</sup> is a holiday because it is the day his death in 1850 is commemorated, but his

biography could have contained a different ending if his life had not been saved on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1813, at the famous Battle of San Lorenzo. The person who saved him was Afro-descendant Juan Bautista Cabral (some say he was a *zambo* [mixed black and indigenous] origin, of Guarani stock). The academic version of that history ignored his ethnic origin for a quite long time. This is still the case today.

### ***2015 calendar***

2015 is an intense electoral year in Argentina. The 25<sup>th</sup> of October will be key because Argentines will go to the ballot box to elect the president who will govern till 2019. It is no surprise that for the first time in the country’s electoral history there is a fictional, black candidate, a person who is parodied, whose name is like a word game related to that of the U.S. President: Barack Obama. A smiling and innovative Omar Obaca came on the scene through the social media; his political propaganda has been aired on the public airwaves. Throughout Buenos Aires, posters containing his slogans have cropped up. In them, the fictive candidate asks to people to vote for him so he can make history and become the first black president of Argentina, e.g., “Vote in Black” and “The Black Man Really Can,” which are a wink at the slogan “Yes We Can” used by Obama in his 2008 campaign. These posters combine humor and an ironic tone aimed at local politics.

One slogan suggests the imposition of a “tax on single men,” so that women who want to enlarge their bust can with the campaign money collected. It is a different way of looking at the problem of the new application of the controversial Earnings Tax. Another proposes that compatriot Pope Francisco be the president of FIFA (after the corruption scandal). The candidate salutes us by forming a “W” with his three fingers (for “Winner,” he asserts), as a parody of the Peronist “V” salute. Adding even more humor and a touch of originality, Obaca is searching for his Vice President through the social media; he needs him or her by October 2015. He asks who might be his VP on his web platform (FWTV), and holds a sort of contest asking that people send him proposals. The winner will be whoever offers the most original proposal; he or she will be on the electoral ballot with him. What’s interesting about the case of Obaca is that his creators decided to create a black character. One reading could be the discovery and appreciation

our or black past. Interest in African origins is only a recent phenomenon; it has grown quite a bit in academic and other circles for about 20 years, although there is still much to be done. In dealing with a country whose elite denied a black presence from the get go, perhaps Obaca is a nod meant to further convince the public of the idea that a black past is important now, even if they don’t want to see that. In principle, the idea of a black president should be seen as a good antidote for racism. Just the reality of that possibility should destroy common notions and stereotypes that see blacks associated with the worst, a people submerged in marginalization and poverty. All the historical events and moments mentioned in this article—some well known, others not—interact or directly deal with negritude in Argentina. Thus, they can help bring to light a silenced presence.

***First Self-Managed Census  
of Afro-Argentines of  
Colonial Origin:  
Misibamba Association, Ciudad  
Evita's IDB Neighborhood, and  
Nearby Areas  
(Municipality of La Matanza,  
Buenos Aires, 2014<sup>1</sup>)***

Carlos César Lamadrid  
*Candombero*  
Secretary, *Misibamba* Association  
Afro-Argentine of Colonial Origin

César Omar Lamadrid  
*Candombero*  
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***By way of an introduction, how many are there?***

**I**n social anthropology, generations of bibliographies problematizing, exalting and recommending qualitative methods have ended up clearly and almost completely situating them in the realm of scientific knowledge. Yet, the social imaginary, which is bolstered by scientific discovery, common sense, and journalism, continues to be fascinated by researching Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin by using census-type, quantitative questions.



When researchers attempt to find answers to them, uncertainty, statements, and people refuse to answer them, make it much less likely there will be a quick solution that concrete numbers of answers would seem to offer due to their apparent simplicity. If one can assume that the divide between nature and culture happily results from the process of seeing humans as less biological, since they are cultural beings, the problem of dividing between number and culture remains. Their correlation or lack thereof can be inferred in (un)certain results. Thus, the absence of an explicatory framework for understanding its (political construction), as occurs in population surveys, confers a sense of realism to the numbers that makes them essentially real. Quantifying the social does not exist without some theory to support it, a method to construct it, and a representational policy to endorse it. Any reading of it is not derived from its essence: the usual example is the interpretation of a glass being half full or half empty. Broadly, or at least in the case at hand, quantitative seduction persists regardless how often these issues are brought to light. Since not everything can be reduced to numbers, they do not have the ability to explain hardly anything unless they are not contextualized, problematized, and relativized. Absolute numbers, relative numbers, percentages, averages, and lesser-known tools, like the Chi Square and the Gauss Square, camouflage numerical majorities and minorities. After they are enunciated, the cultural is

open to all kinds of interpretations; they are often unwarranted, which is when researchers curse for having rushed to create a question with an incorrect key. This dilemma is no less problematic for Afro-Argentines, who having endured a recent ethno-genetic process are trying to become visible in greater society and formulate just these sorts of questions.

### ***A population census as a tool for State control***

According to Benedict Anderson (1993), a census ends up being used by the State, just as is the case with museums and maps, by controlling the symbolic, to achieve the imagined community, by amalgamating the symbolic with the nation. 'Thus, the census, map and museum' analyze the way in which the nineteenth-century Colonial State, and the policies its mentality favored, subconsciously and dialectically created the grammar of nationalisms, which emerged later on to combat them. In fact, we could even say that the State imagined its local adversaries...way before they came into authentic, historical existence. The abstract quantification/serialization of people achieved by the census, the logoization of political space due to maps, and the 'ecumenical' and profane genealogization of museums made intertwined contributions to the formation of these images (Anderson 2000: 14-15). In Argentina, population censuses go back to the colonial period (known as the pre-statistical period) with Juan José de Vértiz y Salcedo, Viceroy of the River Plate, and the 1778 census.

There was another in 1810, and the statistical period started in 1869, with the First National Census under Sarmiento's presidency. The Second National Census (1895) took place under Urriburu's government, and there were six more in the twentieth century (1914, 1947, 1960, 1970, 1980 and 1991): there have been two since the beginning of the twenty-first century (2001 and 2010).

Thanks to Anderson, we understand that those first three were decisive for configuring the Europeanized, national citizens who were formed by the 80s and the Centennial; the sub-Saharan and Afro-descendant population (and the indigenous one) were underrepresented. According to Hernán Otero (2007), this whitening was based on the idea that censuses not only quantified the present moment, but also qualified the future in the form of a kind of national, genealogical, *carte blanche*, more constructing than describing its results with a vast and complex rhetoric that articulates political and historical elements. This is precisely how the Second National Census alluded to the imminent beauty of Argentineness, upon concluding its "Black Race" chapter's few paragraphs: "The issue of races that is so important in the United States does not thus exist in the Argentine Republic, where soon its population will be completely unified to form a new and beautiful, white race product of contact among all the European nations populating American soil" (Second National Census 1895: XLVIII). Quantifying to know, control, compare,

predict and, of course, forget. These, among others, were the attributes that emanated from the construction of each census: these census projects did much more than quantify the population, given the fact they dealt with subjects as diverse as types of housing, heads of cattle, religious beliefs, the number of arrows owned by indigenous people (of men of fighting age, of course), and numbers of seats in theaters. These criteria reflected the intersection of sociopolitical interests and inter-census variables. The State reserved for itself the right to create and carry out national censuses and utilized them to present itself to the citizenry and world with a sort of glamorous, statistical realism, even though it was hiding the falsehood in those calculations. Thus, the pride resulting from positioning itself as the seventh most powerful, agro and livestock exporter in the world—which earned as the name "global breadbasket"—promoted Argentina as a country that needed immigrants, particularly European ones willing to work in the countryside, according to the National Constitution's Article 25 (it still there now). Yet, most workers lived in semi-slave conditions, if not flat out slavery, given the forced nature of the transfer of thousands of Patagonian Indians captured during the so-called Conquest of the Desert to work project and sugar mills in the Northeast (Valco 2010).

## *Afro-descendants in the 2010 National Census<sup>2</sup>*

In considering solely the last six national censuses, we see that their socio-demographic indicators sensitively vary (Carnero 2013). The last one incorporated a question about Afro-descendants, in order to get a census sample: it was deployed only in homes that received Form A (a broadened form). Laura López (2006) analyzed the reasons for this, which revealed that they could be explained the State's commitment after debates held in the 90s among Afro activists, NGOs, translational and multilateral organizations (UNESCO, OAS, IDB, WB, Ford Foundation, etc.) to implement positive policies for acknowledgment and historical reparation for the Afro-descendant population. One of the policies was this particular census sampling, which was seen as an international demand by the countries that participated in and benefited from the slave trade. The Santiago +5 Pre-Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia, Discrimination, and Intolerance, on December 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, 2000, in Santiago de Chile, was decisive in this process. Four Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin participated in it, among them one of this article's authors: César Omar Lamadrid. It was at this conference that the term 'Afro-descendant' be used to designate descendants of enslaved Sub-Saharan. The term spread at the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and

Connected Forms of Intolerance (August 31-September 8, 2001), in Durban, South Africa, in which Lamadrid and two other Afro-Argentines. The Pilot Study of Afro-descendants was the immediate antecedent to the Afro subject on the 2010 Census: it was carried out between April 6-13, 2005, in the Buenos Aires Monserrat neighborhood and Santa Rosa de Lima neighborhood (in Santa Fe) by the *Tres de Febrero* National University with technical support from INDEC, consulting by Afro organizations, and financing from the World Bank. The study showed that 3% of those polled considered themselves Afro-descendants: 4.3% in Monserrat and 3.8% in Santa Rosa de Lima (Stubbs and Reyes 2006). Conceptually, those who participated in the census should have answered the question on both the Pilot Study and the 2010 Census, given that after the events of Chile and South Africa the right to self-determination was respected. The process's Achilles Heel resided in the fact that the strong and secular process of invisibilization to which State had subjected this population group favored self-concealment in both instruments, and even forgetfulness regarding being descendants of slaves. It also constructed so powerful a social stigma on the category of 'black' that the recent and complex term or category 'Afro-descendants' did not end up being as accepted as had been expected. Even if an awareness campaign was carried out prior to the Pilot Study, by the time the 2010 Census came around not much

effort was put into this. There were a few relevant events whose social relevance was limited or non-existent outside the intimate circle of people already aware of and committed to the process. Even so, concrete results of the Afro-descendant population were obtained, but they were not published with the census's general results, but later, in 2012. Let us focus on the number of people polled, their place of residence and birth. The rest of the results can be found on the INDEC web page and in the Census's last, two volumes. 149,493 people were polled (76,054 men and 73,429 women), out of a total population of 40,117,096. This comes to 0.37%, way below the usual 2 to 4%, or the 2,000,000 people that some of the Afro-activists and academics inspired by the Pilot Study's national projects sustained. The greatest quantity of them lives in the Province of Buenos Aires (38.6%, which divides into 25.2% in the municipalities of Greater Buenos Aires, and 13.4% in the rest), the autonomous City of Buenos Aires (10.5%), Entre Ríos (8.5%), Santa Fe (6.4%), and Cordoba (6.3%). The rest reside in Mendoza (3.2%) and 0.4% in La Pampa, Tierra del Fuego, Antarctica and South Atlantic Islands. 92% of them are Afro-Argentines and 8% are foreigners, among them 84.9% of them Afro-Latin Americans, 17.7% of them Afro-Uruguayans.

### ***The Misibamba Association's Self-Managed Census***

A need to be able to rely on reliable statistics regarding today's Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin was expressed at the *Misibamba* meeting that took place on March 16, 2014, at the IDB neighborhood in Ciudad Evita (Municipality of La Matanza, Buenos Aires). The reason for doing this was to satisfy the demands of many who had questions, given the fact that quantitative data allows one to easily calculate what percentage of the population concerned them. Despite the fact the 2010 National Census asked a question along these lines, but the results are unsatisfactory due to theoretical, methodological, and text.<sup>3</sup> We decided to do a quantitative study polling a specific area in which we knew there was a considerable number of Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin: the IDB neighborhood and contiguous areas. Thus, we designed a poll containing pertinent questions. After a conversation in March 2014, which included training by Pablo Cirio, the project was improved, for example, with a decision to include a question about musical knowledge, which is central to Afro-Argentine life. We defined our objective as polling the Afro-Argentine population of Colonial Origin, a term coined by *Misibamba* around 2008 for designating Afro-descendants descending from Sub-Saharan, enslaved Africans in the territory that is now Argentina. This distinguishes the existence of other coexisting, Afro groups resulting from immigration: of course, they have a different history, problems, and demands for the nation-

State. This category complicates the globalizing and trans-border nature of the African Diaspora and (re)enforces the concept locally so that people can deal with their own problems. The emergence of this construction can be summarized in the following three points:

- 1) The quest for State acknowledgment of their earlier existence in the nation;
- 2) The struggle against the inherited and hegemonic sense that assumes that there are no Argentines who descend from enslaved ancestors, which makes them seem foreign in their own country; and
- 3) The will to position themselves as having been among the country's creators, and seeking said acknowledgment via their inclusion in official history (Cirio 2010,2015).

The census was taken between April and July 2014. We first distributed the form in hard copies and via the Internet to

homes in which we knew at least one Afro-Argentine live, so he or she could complete it and also poll all other in their home, equally. We were soon able to see that this mode was not operative: the entity's Secretary, Carlos César Lamadrid, started to visit the families and filling out the forms. They contained a few, simple questions. Like the Pilot Study and the 2012 Census, with the person being polled self-identifying and only registered those who wanted to participate, so long as they self-identified as Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin. It was estimated that about a dozen decided not to participate, or were not polled, due to logistical reasons, although they wanted to be. The form that was designed contains seven questions distributed in columns large enough to include 9 people (if there are more in any particular home, the poll was continued on another form).

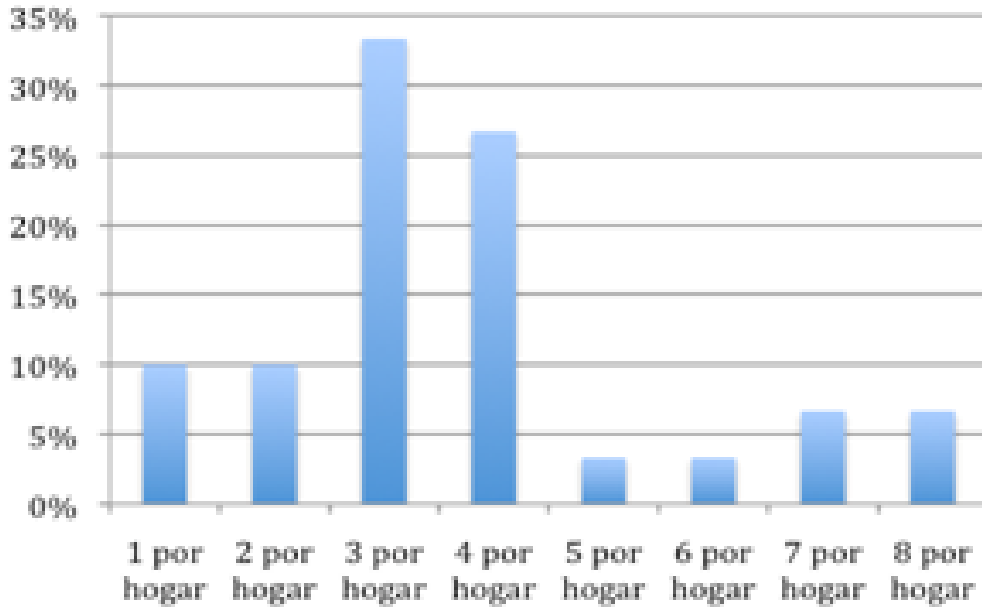
1. **Names and Surnames:** Record all the names and surnames that appear on your NID (National Identification Document).
2. **Date and Place of Birth:** You should record the place in terms of locale, municipality, or department and province. If the birth was in Buenos Aires, record the neighborhood.
3. **Age:** Age at the time of the census.
4. **Education:** Record the last grade completed. If you are involved in a professional program, specify which, where it is being done, and the program of study has begun, is midway, or finished.
5. **Work:** If you work, clarify if it is formally or informally, self-employment or if the job depends on a third party or seniority. If you don't work, explain if it is due to unemployment, retirement, or disability.
6. **Musical achievement:** Detail whatever you think is necessary in terms of dance, singing, musical interpretation, and composition; if you have formal training and were or are part of any kind of music group.

7. **2010 National Census:** Indicate if you were polled as an Afro-descendant.

**We polled a total number of 112 people: 53 men (47.32%) and 59 women (52.68%), most of them residents of Ciudad Evita (IDB Barrio), but also at locations in Matanzas province, in Isidro Casanova (17 de Marzo and San Alberto neighborhoods), Lomas de Mirador, and Villa Insuperable (*varón*=male/*mujeres*=women).**



**These 112 people live in 31 homes with the following distribution (*hogar*=home):**



**With regard to age groups, we divided those we polled into three groups, with the oldest person being 91 (the range was from four months-91 years of age):**

Children [niños] (0 to 18 years)	50	44.64%
Adults [adultos] (19 to 65 años)	48	42.86%
Seniors [mayores] (66- above)	14	12.5%



**The studies include 11 categories, including illiteracy:**

Pre-school age	6	5.36%
In primary	14	12.5%
Completed primary	27	24.1%
Uncompleted primary	3	2.68%
In secondary	19	16.96%
Secondary complete	23	20.54%
Uncompleted secondary	7	6.25%
In university	4	3.57%
Completed university	2	1.79%
Not school age	6	5.36%
Illiterate	1	0.89%

**Birthplaces include:**

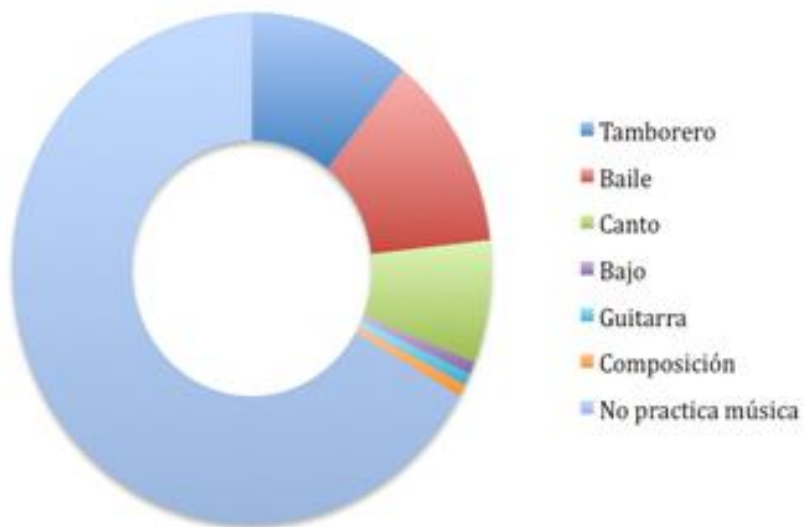
Ciudad de Buenos Aires	-	83	74,11%
Buenos Aires	La Matanza	24	21,43%
	Esteban Echeverría	1	0,89%
Santa Fe	Rosario	1	0,89%
	Santa Fe	1	0,89%
Mendoza	Godoy Cruz	1	0,89%
Entre Ríos	Gualeguaychú	1	0,89%





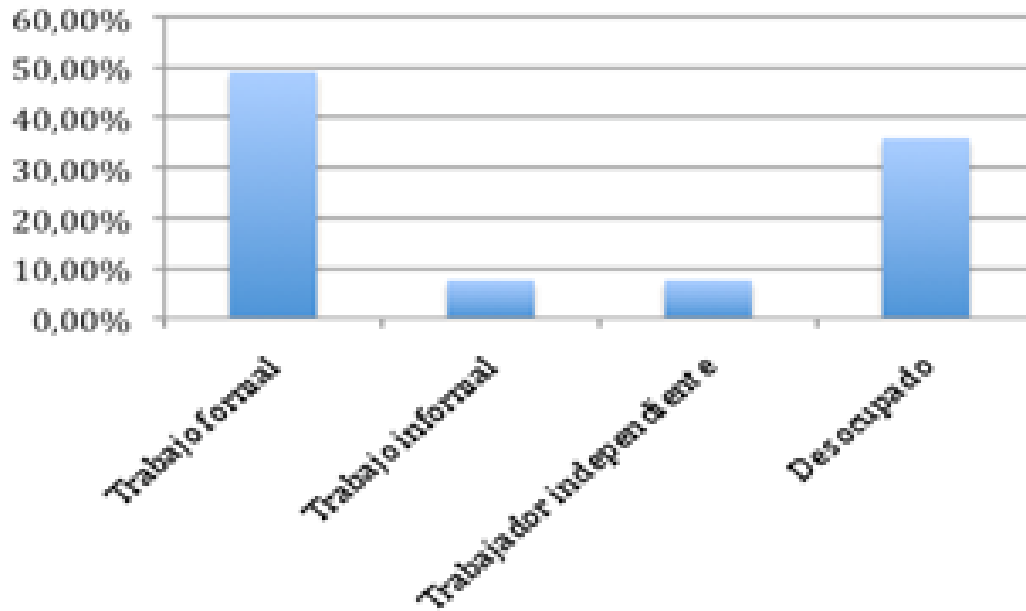
**Musicality is diverse and is represented in 7 categories, including one for its absence. Since a number of those polled had developed more than one talent, this N variable went from 112 to 129:**

Drummer <sup>4</sup>	14	10.85%
Dance	16	12.40%
Singing	10	7.75%
Bass	1	0.78%
Guitar	1	0.78%
Composition	1	0.78%
No practice of music	86	66.66%



**For occupations, we polled the economically active population, an adult age group (48 people), although we added five seniors who were working but retired. Thus, N went from 112 to 53. Of the 14 seniors, 10 were retired.**

Formal work	26	49.06%
Informal work	4	7.54%
Independent work	4	7.54%
Unemployed	19	35.86%



**Regarding having been registered as Afro-descendants in the 2010 Census, the results were shocking and dismaying: 100% said they had not, as they received Form B.**

*Some interpretations*

Given the limited scope and simplicity of our census, we were only able to report on the small universe we polled, and abstained from comparing it to others and project any representativity on a national level. Recalling the metaphor about the glass of water, numbers do not speak for themselves, especially if they are analyzed using erroneous suppositions that distort reality. But, interpreting results can help understand social dynamics of Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin. Place of birth was recorded as completely as possible, even with respect to the

neighborhoods of those born in the City of Buenos Aires. This allow us to update, at least in part, the origin of Afro-descendants in the hypothesis that the San Telmo and Monserrat neighborhoods, which are held in the popular imagination and certain academic literature as “Afro neighborhoods,” but have ceased being representative of this a long time ago: our census result was zero. Nevertheless, we can state that Carlos César Lamadrid lives in Monserrat with his family, and was born in Constitución. Similarly, five of the 83 Afro-porteños were born in Recoleta, a neighborhood that was not

historically inhabited by Afros, due to its socioeconomic profile. The reason for this “anomaly” stems from the fact that these births occurred at *Maternidad Pardo*, which was located there and was the usual institution to which poor women went to give birth, even from as far as Villa Soldati. The overwhelming majority of Afro-*porteños* (74.11%) can be attributed to the process of gentrification to which they’ve historically been subjected. The presence of 112 people who were polled in Matanzas does not prove that their elderly lived there since colonial times (Agostino 2012a and b). According to oral history, they arrive at the IDB (Inter-American Development Bank) neighborhood when the housing complex (pavilions) in Villa Soldati, on the outskirts of the *porteño* area, they called Villa Cartón (Cardboard Town) due to the materials used to build their walls. It was a flood-prone area next to the municipal dump. The land (19 hectares) belonged to the Municipality of Buenos Aires, which ceded it to the National Government in 1967, according to a Plan for the Eradication of *Villas de Emergencia* (Shantytowns) to build the Soldati Urban Complex in 1971. The eradication was carried out in stages and was concluded by 1973. Around the 1950s, evictions from communal housing in central *porteño* neighborhoods like Monserrat had begun. The acronym IDB was the name given another neighborhood for working-class people in the *Conurbano Bonaerense*’s constant process of

urbanization. Some Afro-*porteño* homes in other Matanzas locations are the result of IDB neighborhood families having to move due to the housing shortage. The data regarding those who work reveals a high number. There are two soccer players, two sanitation workers, four cooperative employees, and one employee at the National Congress. Afro-Argentines are traditionally employed in these sectors, but this is not stated in the only scholarly work on the subject (Colabella 2012). In adding the percentages of formal, informal, and independent workers, etc., the highest number of all is that of the unemployed (35.86%), which is evidence of the extent of the group’s economic vulnerability. The coincidence in the fact that 100% of those polled were not registered as Afro-descendant in the 2010 Census has an antecedent that was partly revealed in the 2005 Pilot Study’s results (Stubbs and Reyes 2006). The chapter “Selección de las Áreas para la Aplicación del Operativo” [Selection of Areas for Application of Instrument] explains that the Monserrat and Santa Rosa de Lima neighborhoods were chosen from a large group of areas proposed by the involved NGOs, among them La Matanza. We were able to clarify this issue when interviewing Lucía Dominga López, President of the *Casa de Cultura Indo-Afro-Americana* “Mario Luis López” (Santa Fe), because her entity worked on the Pilot Study. Although the IDB La Matanza neighborhood was proposed, and might have been chosen, the INDEC decided to

dismiss due to concern about the safety of the census takers.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Conclusions***

The *Misibamba* Association's extreme interest in guarding Afro-Argentine culture is expressed in its bylaws: it felt obliged to create and carry out the First Self-Administered Census for Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin to attend to needs the State did not know how to satisfy: quantitatively know this historically invisibilized population, which is not ignored at the present time. The 2010 National Census was insufficient and unsatisfactory because of its shortcomings, especially when one considers that of the 112 Afro-descendants who were polled, none of them 'had the good fortune' to receive the right form. The shortcomings were theoretical, methodological, and with its text. When it included the work 'African' as a synonym of 'Afro-descendant' in a question, it left the door open to register, for example, descendants of Egyptians, Moroccans, or Spaniards from the Canary Islands, African territories in and of themselves, but not relevant to the slave process the term 'Afro-descendant' implies. Among the results not representative here, for example are the fact that 92% were born in Argentina: they are Afro-Argentines. But this geographic variable (birthplace) hides another, qualitative factor: the historical process for which reason they were born here. The category 'Afro-Argentine of Colonial Origin' is enriching, and implies the slave trade in which the country participated in

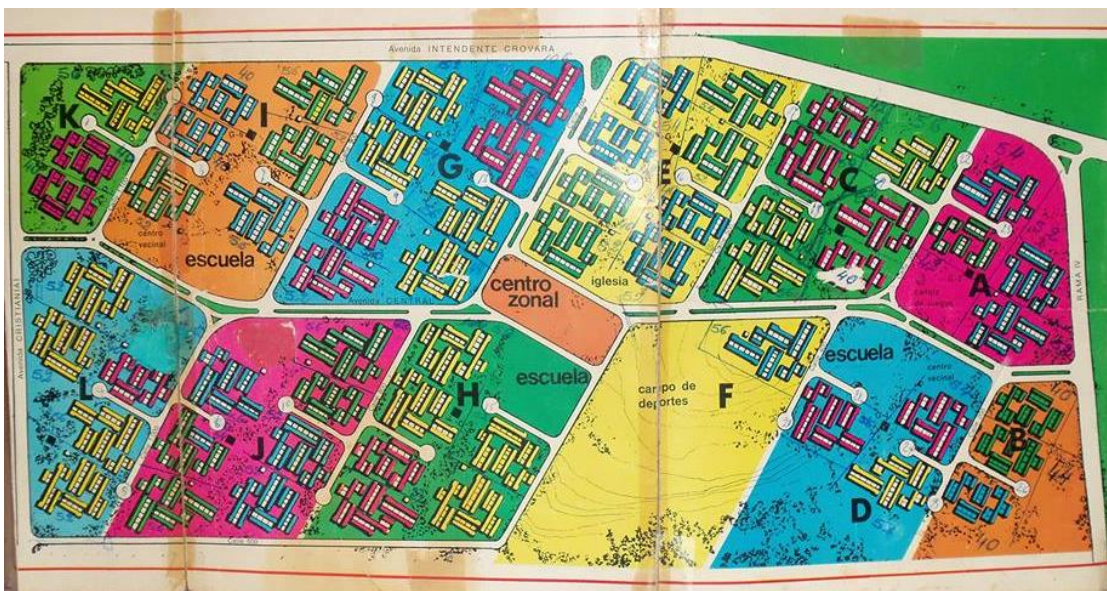
colonial times, and helps differentiate the Afro groups that elected to live here by immigrating: Cape Verdeans, Afro-Uruguayans, and Afro-descendants from other American countries, and even Sub-Saharan Africans. Let us imagine a hypothetical case: if a descendant of enslaved people in this territory and a child of Senegalese immigrants are Afro-Argentines for the 2010 Census, a statistical realism that implies reducing people to numbers would also invisibilize the sociocultural and historical context, and distort specific issues like the demand by Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin to be included in curricular school materials, which should concern only this group and not all Afros in Argentina. Other problems with the 2010 Census involve how consciousness was raised about the Afro topic. INDEC celebrated it as an unknown past, according to the beginning of a chapter titled "Población afrodescendiente" (Afro-Descendant Population): "A National Census for the First Time in Argentina's Statistical History." Calling themselves pioneers is refuted by the results of the first and second national censuses. They contain numbers about this, although they were constructed via other paradigms and interests, for example: when describing their long-standing presence in the country, which was a major concern back then. We also lament the fact that the laboriously studied results that the Afro-Descendant Pilot Study garners (Stubbs and Reyes 2006) are ignored by the 2010 Census, given those data were

intended to contribute to the 2010 Census's crafting and the training of census takers. The presentation of the entire Afro issue based on a census of only part of the population should be seen as a sample, and not as part of the census itself. Even if this is clear in the INDEC publication, some researchers (Bidaseca 2010, Frigerio and Lamborghini 2011, Carniero 2013, Maidana, Ottenheimer and Zubrzycki 2014) and Afro activists simply the matter and overestimate their importance, since it equates Forms A and B, and celebrates a novelty where there was none: a census is not the same as a census sample. The 2012 National Census only should have used Question 6 to poll descendants of people who were enslaved in the national territory or, if it appropriate, as Argentines. This would have worked well with Question 5 about belonging to original peoples, since it considered only those who lived here prior to the European invasion, and not the occasional residence of people belonging to other American ethnic groups. The final results quickly imply that all of the peoples polled are from

Argentina.<sup>6</sup> (*Tomo* 1: 272-291). Had the State seriously consider the international commitment to discover the quantitative dimension of the Afro population to efficiently understand its needs (Campbell Barr 2010: 4),<sup>7</sup> the 2010 Census would have been exemplary and *Misibamba* would not have found itself needing to create a census, using its own resources, so that the citizenry could have coherent statistics. Evidently, empowered social movements, even with their shortcomings and defects, tend to do a better job with these issues than the State and bureaucracy, and their lack of knowledge and opportunism. The small universe of 112 Afro-Argentines of Colonial Origin who were polled due to their own initiative, and with the collaboration of an anthropologist (one of this text's co-authors) shows that it is possible to help change the perception that there are no descendants of enslaved Africans from the colonial period, who did come by ship, but not voluntarily. Let us hope that the next National Census acts responsibly, after our miniscule contribution, and with inner knowledge.



*On the left and below, maps showing the location of Ciudad Evita and the IDB Neighborhood, respectively.*



*Original map of the IDB Neighborhood, which was given to those who went to live there (Col. Carlos César Lamadrid).*



*Misibamba Association. Buenos Aires, June 14th, 2009. Photo: Pablo Cirio*



*Los Diamantes Negros. From left to right. Jorge "Pano" Oturbé, Albertina Elsa "Tina" Lamadrid, Oscar Alfredo "Fred" Nogueira and Luis María Posadas.  
© 1950, n/p. Unidentified photographer.*





*Pavillion 21, Department. 852, Villa Soldati. From left to right. Julio César Lamadrid, Oscar Noroña, and two neighbors. On the wall, a picture of Juan Domingo Perón. Col. Lucía Elsa "Coca" Lamadrid. © 1960, Buenos Aires. Photographer unknown.*



*Scene from Albertina Elsa "Tina" Lamadrid's house. Ciudad Evita (Buenos Aires), March 11th, 2010. Photos: Pablo Cirio.*

## Notes:

1-Corrected and illustrated version of the “Primer censo autogestionado de afroargentinos del tronco colonial. Barrio BID de Ciudad Evita y zonas aledañas.” In *Actas de las Quintas Jornadas de Historia Regional de La Matanza* (La Matanza: Universidad Nacional de La Matanza, 2014): 338-354.

2-Its exact name is Censo Nacional de Población, Hogares y Viviendas 2010. Censo del Bicentenario (Bicentennial Census).

3-Question No. 6 on Form A asked: “¿Ud. o alguna persona de este hogar es afrodescendiente o tiene antepasados de origen afrodescendiente o africano (padre, madre, abuelo/as, bisabuelos/as) (Are you or any person in this home an Afro-descendant or have ancestors of Afro-descendant or African origin (rather, mother, grandfather/grandmother, great grandfather/great grandmother)?”.

4-We use the emic category *tamborero* and not the usual Spanish word for ‘percussionist.’ Although they are similar, Afro-*porteños* do not accept the idea that drums are percussed (beaten) to make them make a sound, but rather the drummer makes them speak.

5- INDEC also dismissed the Santa Rosa de Lima one due to the same fear, but the Santa Fe NGO offered itself as a guarantee, so the neighborhood was chosen.

6-If we consider some, like Mapuches, they are also in Chile because they

existed there prior to the creation of both countries.

7-In October 2009, the *Misibamba* Association and the *Casa de la Cultura Indo-Afro-Americana* (Santa Fe) participated in an interview with Attorney Ana María Edwin, General Director of INDEC, to dialogue about the coming 2010 National Census and the aforementioned issue. Unfortunately, the observations shared and offers made to logistically support the Santa Fe NGO (that worked on the Pilot Study) were not taken into account: we do not know what expert consulting they ended up receiving.

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# *Besides June: Afro-Peruvian Culture Month. Progress in Public Policies for the Afro-Peruvian Population by 2015*

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*“We are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied  
until justice rolls down like waters  
and righteousness like a mighty stream.”*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

**W**hen we think about Latin America and the Caribbean we can see, among their many characteristics, a continent with a high degree of social, economic, political, and cultural inequality. In this particular context, the Afro-descendant population is one of the social groups that are still being excluded and made invisible by processes in the hands of States and societies. Today, in speaking of the Afro-descendant population we are talking about a group for whom the

generation of inclusive public policies and affirmation actions is particularly important. According to the Organization of American States (OAS), “there are about 200 million Afro-descendant inhabitants throughout the Americas, who continue being victims of racism and discrimination, according to offices of the Inter-American System. They are still being deprived of some of their basic rights and needs.”<sup>1</sup>

According to the Black Association for the Defense and Protection of Human

Rights, in Peru “Afro-descendants make up approximately 8% of the national population, almost all of them situated along the Peruvian coast. They have been in a subordinate position in the State’s social, economic, and political structure for many years. This has meant less access to the benefits of socioeconomic development.”<sup>2</sup>

Afro-Peruvian homes have a lower, monthly, per capita income than the national average.<sup>3</sup> This is why they exist at a lower socioeconomic strata and experience different levels of ethnic discrimination that limits the quality and cordiality of the health, education, and employment services they receive. In addition, the Afro-descendant population sees itself as a victim of double exclusion: due to their socioeconomic conditions and their ethno-racial characteristics. The low quality of their education and their economic, political, and civic marginalization are other, enormous, additional problems that afflict Afro-Peruvian communities. These can be seen in the scarce employment opportunities available to young people, low wages, a lack of credit, and the absence of business initiatives to ensure their development. Poverty can be found in the terrible living conditions typical of marginal, urban zones and communities.

Why should the State prioritize its acknowledgment of the Afro-Peruvian population? Because it represents between 8-10% of the Peruvian population. There are no official figures, since they have not been included in the

census since 1940. They have been responsible for the hard and heavy work that has built the country for over 500 years. When friends, family members, and colleagues say there is no racism, Afro-Peruvians have to counter that, because racism is often expressed via everything that it silences, unfortunately, and the Afro-Peruvian population struggles against this racist silence that contributes to the negation of their identity.<sup>4</sup> A 2008, World Bank and Grade study showed that 13% of Afro-descendants do not go to primary school, 30% do not finish secondary school, only 6% go on to advanced (university) studies, and only 1.9% finish them. These data reveal real exclusion in the country’s national, educational system, since poverty and ethno-racial discrimination force them to focus on getting low wage jobs and so-called *cachuelos* (extremely low paid jobs) that allow people to satisfy basic, immediate, economic needs, and indirectly strengthen the prejudices and stereotypes held regarding their inability to develop in higher-level, more responsible jobs and high-level professional positions. In the context of the historical reality that the Afro-Peruvian population is facing, the State’s social policies have not taken it into account. Instead, it has been more oriented towards the indigenous population, both in Lima and the Sierra, and forgotten that most Afro-Peruvians live mostly along the coast and are part of poorer populations. This is a consequence of the invisibility they still face, and their limited ability to respond

to this, or organize, or take action, which makes the promotion of projects involving inclusive development, and the struggle against racism and discrimination, very difficult. The State has done very little regarding the poverty, and open forms of racism and racial discrimination. Neither has it promoted social policies to ensure Afro-Peruvians have access to the same, equal opportunities available to the rest of the population. There are no public policies that focus on or incentivize progress for Afro-Peruvians; neither are they encouraged to use their personal and professional talents to distinguish themselves and served as inspiration for others. In this context, what follows is an update on the most recent progress made regarding the Afro-Peruvian population.<sup>5</sup>

- **Supreme Decree No 927 – 2007 – PCM. Policies with which all National Government entities must comply.**

Section 4 of Article 2 establishes that all State entities must contribute to the implementation of nationwide programs and sectorial policies for the integral development of the Andean, Amazonian, Afro-Peruvian, and Asian-Peruvian peoples.

- **Supreme Resolution No. 010 – 2009 – MIMDES.** Expresses the forgiveness the Peruvian States is requesting of its people of Afro origin, acknowledging their effort and struggle for a national identity, and their participation in the nation's building.

- **Law No 28761 – Day of Afro-Peruvian Culture.** On May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2006,

the Fourth of June was declared as the Day of Afro-Peruvian Culture.

- **Supreme Decree No. 005 – 2014 – JUS. National Plan for Human Rights 2014-2016.**

Four strategic alignments define the promotion of a culture of human rights; the design and strengthening of a public policy for the promotion and protection of civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights; the design and execution of policies on behalf of special protection groups; the strengthening of internal juridical law via the implementation of international instruments for the promotion and protection of human rights. The design and execution of policies on behalf of special protection groups includes the Afro-Peruvian population as well as other ethno-racial minorities.

- **RM No. 339 – MC 2014. Orientations for the implementation of public policies for the Afro-Peruvian population.**

The principal objective consists of establishing a group of basic orientations for guiding the State's policies regarding development and social inclusion, as well as the Afro-Peruvian populations exercising its rights.

There have been small, important, basic advances in the State's policies that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. Recently created, the Office of Policies for the Afro-Peruvian Population (General Office of Intercultural Citizenry of the Culture Ministry) is the organic unit in charge of

designing and implementing policies, plans, protection programs, promoting rights, and developing the Afro-Peruvian population. Its goal is to guarantee their development with an identity on equal footing and with equal rights. When it began, it faced many challenges, especially the lack of statistical information on the Afro-Peruvian population. Yet, it took a great step forward because the 2017 census will include the Afro-Peruvian ethnic variable for the first time in more than 70 years of invisibility. This will be a point of departure for generating affirmative actions aimed at development for the Afro-Peruvian population.

The establishment of a Day of Afro-Peruvian Culture is a good reason for taking the issue out into the public. The Culture Ministry has been creating activities for the Month of Afro-Peruvian Culture,<sup>6</sup> with different cultural, political, and educational actions, to make visible the contributions of Afro-Peruvian society and put its problems on the agenda with a goal to discuss public policies that will contribute to improving their living conditions. The program for the Month of Afro-Peruvian Culture also included conversations, film screenings, and photographic exhibits designed in an articulated manner with civic organizations, academic institutions, and other State entities.

June 4<sup>th</sup>, the Day of Afro-Peruvian Culture that was established in 2006, is central to the Month of Afro-Peruvian

Culture. This day was established to pay homage to the birth of Nicomedes Santa Cruz, a poet and key representative of Afro-Peruvian social thought. This version had a really special significance because it marked the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. The Culture Ministry distinguished three Afro-Peruvian leaders with the title *Personalidad Meritoria de la Cultura* (a Person of Cultural Merit). This time, it acknowledged the work on promotion and on behalf of the development of the Afro-Peruvian community of researcher and Afro-Peruvian literary expert Milagros Carazas, musician Santiago ‘Coco’ Linares, and photo-documentarian Martín Alvarado. The ceremony took place at the Mario Vargas Llosa Theater at the National Library. It also distinguished the Zaña (Lambayeque) Afro-Peruvian community as a Living Repository of Collective Memory in recognition of their local organizations’ achievements in preserving the memory, history, identity, and culture of the Afro-descendant population.

The Culture Ministry is acknowledging the great contributions of the Afro-Peruvian population to the building of the nation and its economic, social, scientific, cultural, religious, and artistic development. Activities carried out this month are part of the 2014-2015 *Decenio Internacional de los Afrodescendientes* (International Decade of Afro-Descendants), which was proclaimed by the United Nations.



On June 13<sup>th</sup>, ASHANTI PERÚ, the *Red Peruana de Jóvenes Afrodescendientes*, the *Asociación Negra de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos* (ASONEDH), and the Municipality of *San Juan de Miraflores* organized the First “*Orgullosamente Afrodescendiente*” Festival,<sup>7</sup> whose goal was to promote the struggle for human rights, strengthen Afro-Peruvian identity among neighbors, and reevaluate the artistic, cultural, and culinary contributions of Afro-descendants to the development of Peru. The most important activities included:

- An Afro-Peruvian fair with organizations that work in the Afro-descendant community and intercultural organizations that support these populations as they deal with discrimination.
- Cultural presentations of different Afro-Peruvian talent: *festejo*, *landó*, *zamacueca*, *décima* recitals, hip hop, reggae, theater, dance and *zapateo* classes.
- Presentations by stellar Afro-Peruvian artists.
- A Gastronomic Fair with Afro-Peruvian food and desserts.

### ***Final Considerations***

The implementation of affirmative actions will guarantee Afro-Peruvians access and permanence in higher education institutions, reduce the low numbers of them finishing their studies, and open to them the possibility of obtaining better-paid employment, and also broaden the horizons for our Afro-descendant girls, boys, and youth. The

Afro-Peruvian people are Peru’s third cultural root; they should be acknowledged as such, not only in public policies written on paper or in museums that will eventually close, but rather for its direct work with the population. The continuous commitment to human rights and the visibility of young Afro-Peruvians will allow us to continue the struggle against discrimination and low esteem associated with Afro-Peruvian identity. A sustained effort can influence every political space possible on behalf of inclusion and acknowledgement.

### **Notes:**

1- OEA [OAS] (2011). *Estándares de Protección de Afrodescendientes en el Sistema Interamericano* (Protection Standards for Afro-Descendants in the Inter-American System).

2-[www.asonedhperu.org](http://www.asonedhperu.org) (Accessed June 13, 2015).

3-Encuesta Nacional Continua ENCO (Continuous National Survey) 2006.

4-*Autopercepciones de la población afroperuana: identidad y desarrollo* (Self-Perceptions of the Afro-Peruvian Population), una publicación del proyecto regional PNUD “Población afrodescendiente de América Latina” (a publication from the PNUD regional project “Afro-Descendant Project of Latin America).

5-Alerta Contra el Racismo del Ministerio de Cultura del Perú (Alert Against Racism from the Peruvian Culture Ministry), Página de la Dirección de Políticas para Población Afroperuana (Web page of the Policy

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7- [www.ashanti-peru.org](http://www.ashanti-peru.org) (Accessed June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015).



*Afro-Peruvian artists in action, promoted by Ashanti Perú's "Orgullosamente Afrodescendientes" Festival, June 13th, 2015.*



*Presentation by Afro-Peruvian youth from Ashanti Perú at the “Orgullosamente Afrodescendiente” Festival, June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015.*



*Afro-Peruvian Culture Month. June, 2015*

# *A Riot is the Language of the Unheard*

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Last time I reported on the killing of Michael Brown, a young Black male in Ferguson, Missouri and the subsequent the grand jury's verdict of "justifiable homicide" for white police officer, Darrin Wilson. Today, I am reporting on another death of a young Black male, Freddie Gray, of Sandtown a community located in West Baltimore, Maryland. His death involved six (6) police officers. The initial three (3) white males who took part in the chase and take down of Freddie; the others involved were three (3) Black officers and one female officer. The young Black male, Kevin Moore, who videotaped Freddie's arrest, reported that he had been the target of harassment and intimidation by the police until he was arrested and then later released. First those not familiar with Baltimore may be familiar with the highly acclaimed HBO series *The Wire*. This cable television series portrayed the lifestyle of narcotics in West Baltimore, through the eyes of police officers, drug dealers and users. According to some, this show glorified black-on-black street violence, but to others this show touched on the reality of life in an impoverished Black neighborhood. The same neighborhood where police killed Freddie Gray and where the community hit back with protests, in a demonstration that has

been labeled by the media as a full-blown riot.

On April 12<sup>th</sup> four Baltimore bicycle police officers chased Freddie Gray after they made "eye contact" with him on a corner. These events have left us with a number of questions; where does it say it is illegal to make eye contact with a police officer? They chased him down, pinned him to the ground and cuffed him. Why was he being pinned to the ground and cuffed? What law did he break? What threat did an unarmed Black man pose? Gray informed the police that he was having problems breathing. The police ignored his concerns. Then they dragged him into the van. If you watch the video you notice Gray has no control over his own leg movements. They toss him into the van. The officers did not secure him in the van. Before they reached the police station the officers made several stops; at each stop Gray begs for medical attention. His requests continued to be ignored. By the time they reach the police station Gray was unconscious. At that time the paramedics were called and they transported him to the hospital where he died on April 19<sup>th</sup> from his injuries sustained while in the police van. An autopsy revealed that his spine was severed and his voice box was

crushed. Once again, another Black male dead at the hands of police officers.

No one took heed to the protest in Ferguson, or New York, or other large cities around the nation. The phrase Black Lives Matter did not matter. No one listened when Oscar Grant III, Rumain Brisbon, Tamir Rice, Kajieme Powell, Ezel Ford, Akai Gurley, Dante Parker, Michael Brown, John Crawford III, Tyree Woodson, Eric Garner, Victor White III were unarmed and killed by police officers. These are not even a fifth of the names on the list of Black men that have died under similar circumstances. No one listened when 33-year-old Walter L. Scott was shot in the back while running away from the police officer, which then planted his police Taser beside Scott's dead body. He would have gotten away with murder if someone nearby had not videotaped it. The police officer, Michael T. Slager, was arrested and charged with murder (the real test is- will he be convicted). As I watched this video of a man shot in the back, I shook my head and cried. As I react to any news of Black men being killed. It never gets old, it never becomes the norm, it's not normal for humans to live and treat each other this way. Finally the world began to listen on April 18<sup>th</sup> when hundreds of people gathered in front of the Baltimore Police Department in protest. Television newscast showed hundreds of people of all generations standing in protest, while the police stood nearby. Every day the number of protesters increased. You could tell by their faces they were frustrated and their voices became louder, demanding to be heard. The community, which has had a long history of a difficult relationship with the police force, has had enough. They are tired of being hunted down and killed

because of the color of their skin. They have grown tired of the police getting away with murder. They demand that the police are held accountable for Gray's death. I sat down every day to watch the news and Baltimore was the headline, people still marching in the streets demanding justice. The crowd was becoming larger and louder. On April 25<sup>th</sup> the usual 'peaceful' protest, turned violent. Rocks were thrown at police and fires were set. After Gray's funeral the protest continued and confrontation between police and citizens got ugly. Some protesters started fires, burning local businesses, police cars; while some rioters took part in looting. I watched the fires and the running, and the police in riot gear and thought, "this is my home, this is America". I have as much right to live as anyone else. So why do Blacks have to keep fighting for the right to live? Why do the police keep killing us, not only Black males, but many Black females have also been victims of police brutality. Such as Venus Green ("Bitch, you ain't no better than any of the other old black bitches I have locked up," the police officer said to her), and Starr Brown. ("They slammed me down on my face," Brown added, her voice cracking. "The skin was gone on my face."). Unfortunately there was no plea for peace on their behalf. With these stories why is it hard for America to understand how we feel when we are treated as if we were less than a human being? White people (and some Blacks) do not get it, why Blacks were setting stores in their own community on fire and looting. They do not live our frustration. The media showed the burning buildings, the burning police cars and the streets filled with litter. Baltimore's Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, a Black woman, called in 2,000

National Guard troops to the city and the Governor Larry Hogan declared a state of emergency. She also issued a citywide curfew from 10pm-5am. Schools were closed and a major league baseball game was cancelled. People were involved in physical altercations with the police. Other cities took to the streets in protest of Gray's death, Chicago, Minneapolis, Miami, Philadelphia, Portland, Seattle, New York and other cities. The news media did their best to frame the protesters as 'thugs.' People on social media also influenced by the media, said the same. But white Americans could not understand what was going on. They didn't see what the problem was. They live in a different America: Blacks live the effect of segregation and poverty. We can never forget who created our 'ghettos.' We know who cut funding to our school systems and who does not offer us employment. We live in a different America. Whites (and some Blacks) do not understand that Blacks live in a police state, where policies and mass incarceration have removed so many Black men (and women) from society, creating an American residential segregation. All this has to do with the eruption from Black communities across the nation. The media have shown the burning, the looting, but failed to spend any time interviewing or showing the Black men of the Nation of Islam who guarded businesses in the community, telling the protesters not to burn and loot. Nor did they show the community coming out in large numbers after the protests, and sweeping the streets, cleaning up their community. I have family who lives in West Baltimore and they were part of the community cleanup. No the media didn't pay the positive any mind. But we knew to question the questions and ask more

questions. Not that I agree with destroying my community, but I understand the frustration of not being heard for generations. One day America will have to deal with their racism and mistreatment of Blacks. What Blacks ask for is nothing new; they demand their full citizenship and economic independence and social advancement. How can we have social advancement when we are still the oppressed? When we still experience discrimination when it comes to housing, employment, economic, education, social, political oppression and justice. For a quick moment Baltimore's Black community had a little taste of justice when Baltimore State's Attorney Marilyn Mosby, a Black female, on May 1, 2015 charged the six police officers in the death of Freddie Gray. State Attorney Mosby, who comes from a legacy of police officers, promised during her campaign to prosecute officers when needed saying, "No one is above the law." She stated that the police report of the arrest alleged Gary was in possession of an illegal switchblade. But the prosecutor described Gray's arrest as unlawful because the alleged switchblade was actually a spring-assisted pocketknife that is legal under Maryland state law. The prosecutors stated that they had probable cause to file criminal charges against the six police officers who were believed to be involved in Gray's death: the officer driving the van was charged with 2<sup>nd</sup> degree depraved-heart murder and the others were charged with crimes ranging from manslaughter to illegal arrest. At this time all officers are out on bail until trial, again the test will come when they go to trial, will they be convicted? Until when will we continue to live in a militaristic police state?

**BALTIMORE**  
*Huffington Post's website*











# *Bicentennial of Mariana Grajales\**

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On July 10<sup>th</sup>, on the government's flagship program titled *Mesa Redonda* (Round Table) was devoted to the bicentennial of Mariana Grajales. I could not help recall the way renowned historians mocked their colleagues when the latter suggested that this famous Cuban woman be definitively acknowledged as the Mother of the Nation, in Santiago de Cuba, at the National Congress of Historians more than 10 years ago. The fact that the monument to this matriarch of the heroic, pro-independence, Maceo-Grajales clan had been abandoned to systematic decay in a centrally located, Havana park was also not new knowledge. How could I forget that at was in the shadow of that monument, erected in 1931, that members of the Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration (CIR) endured harassment and repression when they offered homage to Mariana on every Mother's Day. Even though all this came by regime sympathizers, it was still hard to believe the cumbersome operation, the energy, resources, and logistics that were expended just to keep a dozen Cuban from placing a simple floral offering at the monument to the Maceo brothers' mother. For many years, Mariana Grajales, like so many Afro-descendants, has been insufficiently acknowledged or remembered. Thus, the *Mesa Redonda* embraced her as a joint exemplary person and standard from time to time; yet, educational and propagandistic systems, which are entirely under State control, do not offer a systematic or

meaningful analysis of the importance and transcendence of this figure as a paradigm of the enormous contribution of humble, Afro-descendent women to the shaping of the nation and to its freedom struggles. Upon seeing the propagandistic barrage that exalts images and judgments of figures of special interest to the Cuban authorities, like Ernesto "Che" Guevara, Vilma Espín, the five spies liberated from U.S. prisons, or the now dead Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, it is noteworthy that the Maceo-Grajales family is not seen as having the importance it deserves in our memory and historical references. Little is said about Mariana Grajales' elevated human, ethical, and patriotic values taught all her children in her unswerving commitment to the just causes. These led them to the redemptive wilderness, where they distinguished themselves as exceptional warriors and military leaders. Many of them gave their lives to the independence cause. Similarly, the most renowned of Mariana Grajales' sons, Major General Antonio Maceo, one of the most universally recognized figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is never seen as a great political, anti-racist, and communitarian leader, nor as the great businessman he was. Cuba's governing leaders give out or deny honors and investitures according to their interests and preferences. It was totally easy for them to designate communist and acolyte Nicolás Guillén as the National Poet Laureate, to whom no one with any brains would deny his greatness and intellectual importance.

Yet, the National Museum of Dance has not even one photograph of the great dancer Carlos Acosta, despite his exceptional trajectory, which has been universally acknowledged. In Mariana Grajales' case, Havana's authorities have done nothing to promote any real acknowledgment of this famous patriot as the Mother of the Nation, a proposal and demand that was made all the way back in the 1950s. On *Mesa Redonda*, they attempted to mention other renowned women of the independence struggles. The invited specialists made no reference to the participation of Afro-descendant women in civic organizations, who for more than a century, promoted the rights of this important social group. Neither did they acknowledge the important contribution of Afro-descendant women to the feminist movement during the first half of the last century. It is not with circumstantial references on a TV program that historic justice can be brought upon.

Extremely important figures like José Antonio Aponte, an 1812 precursor to Cuba's independence; Evaristo Estenoz and Pedro Ivonet, both leaders in the Independent Party of Color (1908-1912); and great labor leader Sandalio Junco and exceptional communist orator Salvador García Agüero all suffer from nearly total anonymity and ignorant abandon. The anniversary came and went, and we all know that Mariana and many others worthy of our veneration and pride continue as victims of ignorance, abandon, and omission simply because they do not fit doctrine's manipulative scheme. But, the persistence of the legacy and example of the Maceo brothers' mother does not depend upon this demagogic manipulation. These values—ethical-moral integrity, unswerving, patriotic and humanistic commitment, and stalwart intransigence against injustice—are very important in facing the challenge of reconstructing the Cuba for which Mariana took her beloved sons to the battlefields.

(\*Courtesy of *CubaNet*)

# *Cuba: Reasons for a Non-Identity*

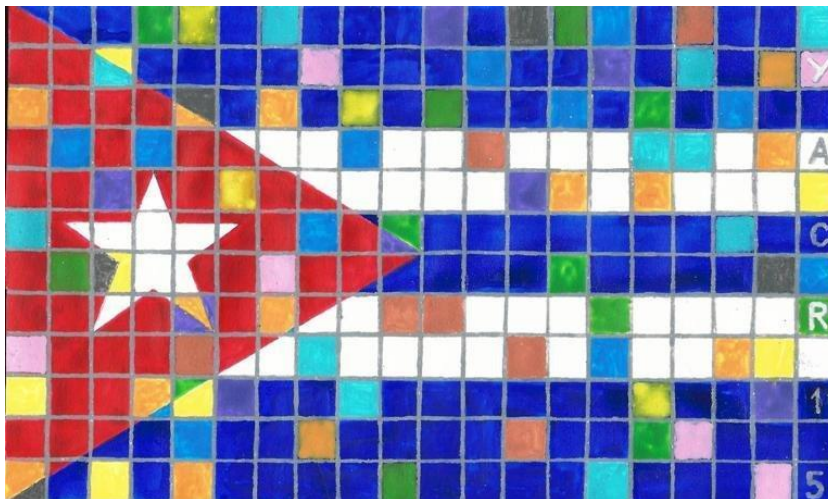
Verónica Vega

Writer

Havana, Cuba

Upon returning from my trip to France, in 2011, the plane entered Cuban airspace in the midst of a spectacular sunset. I looked at the ill-tended, fragile land below, and felt attached to it via an invisible, umbilical cord. It was intense feeling of belonging that I'd thought never possible. Tears welled up in my eyes, spontaneously; with an irrational impulse, I said to my seatmates (who did not speak Spanish): "I am Cuban; this is my country." In trying to share this experience, I've discovered how difficult it is to transmit a sense of pride that is in no way anything like the patriotism imposed against which generations of Cubans have reacted, and react with

rage, desacralizing, or apathy. How does one separate one's country from one's self, from a political process that has asphyxiated our national identity? Once, my son put a badge bearing the Cuban flag on his backpack, and his own cousin visibly and disdainfully asked him: Cuba? For most adolescents, any insignia is better than the Cuban one. They haughtily wear the U.S.'s on shirts, bandanas, caps, etc. One even sees sandals or bags with the British flag on them, vestiges of a fashion craze that was all the rage at the London craft fairs of 2012, and T-shirts referencing other country's soccer teams. In sharp contrast, the only ones interested in Cuban insignias are tourists.



*In Process  
(Yasser)*

One style that is increasingly gaining in popularity among young people is to copy foreign customs like LAM parties (parties in which people play online video games) or celebrate Halloween. There is a specialized market offering articles for birthday parties that feature favorite, U.S., cartoon characters: Mickey Mouse, Snow White, Shrek, Sponge Bob, etc. Even children's, first-grade graduation diplomas sport images of Ariel (the Little Mermaid) and Princess Jasmine, from the film *Aladdin*. There are visible and also hidden reasons for this rejection: a decade's old, economic crisis and an unstoppable flow of emigrating exiles are both weighty reasons, but not enough all on their own. Our first, probing question should be concerning the degree of security a Cuban national ID card or passport offer. Cubans do not feel protected; instead, they feel like controlled objects: at school and work, anytime one is involved in legal procedures or formalities, and even in one's own home, where it is possible to be assaulted by unannounced, mass fumigations, or CDR meetings, or unexpected blackouts. This brings to mind a friend of mine who emigrated, who ten years after leaving would be shocked at the Island's reality: "There are blackouts, and nothing happens! In Chile, if the light goes out for just a few minutes, the next day there are electric company people at your door with gifts, so you don't sue." Incessant questioning by functionaries and the police, our "symbolic" salaries, the risks involved in

trying to be self-employed, and the illegal acrobatics in which we must engage just to survive reaffirm our continuous sense of uncertainty. Conversely, how does one feel pride for a scene to which there seems to be no end, for most of Havana, at least? Crumbling streets, overflowing trash bins, hungry dogs, delayed and overstuffed buses. Our much-acclaimed dignity, a direct inheritance from our homegrown heroes, does not exist any more, at least not in any practical sense. After 37 years of self-sacrificing service in Public Health, a nurse was going to take her first trip abroad (thanks to a family member, not to her career); she confessed to me that almost all her luggage was borrowed. Cuba's showy face, the glittering institutions, or those that are being restored, the luxury hotels, in which everyday citizens are seen with suspicion, don't create any sense of belonging either, logically. I have involuntarily witnessed how Cubans who hope to travel, put up with the humiliation of degrading treatment at no less than three embassies, if not more. Strangers are never treated this way. We enter these spaces, with their promise of escaping to the world, and see ourselves as potential immigrants, a category that falls just short of being a criminal. Cuban émigrés personally experience the advantages of dual citizenship and a measure of civil liberty that would never result from their own origin. An embarrassed primary school teacher told me that her three-year old daughter had said: "When I grow up, I want to be a

foreigner.” How can one remain rooted to a country if one’s daughter, a child barely aware of the world around her, can come up with something as devastating as that?

### ***The concept of nation***

The history of Cuba that is taught in schools, a revisionist version chock full of heroes and slogans, does not seem at all real.

Students memorize, not learn; they repeat, not think. As they pass from grade to grade, with a notion they will be able to use their knowledge outside Cuba, if at all possible, they quickly discover that the ideology is valued more than honor, worth, talent, or discipline.



***The mine (Yasser)***

This is the deformed and reprocessed ideology that is taking form as a nation, a place with formulas and clichés that students use ably to pass Civics exams or a class called “Encounters with Homeland’s History.”

It is also the nation that automatically emerges when it denizens are publicly asked questions such as “Do you feel proud of being Cuban?” or “Would you wear a T-shirt with a Cuban flag on it?”



In a conversation I had with a group of young people, the first answers I got seemed right out of official rhetoric: “Yes. Of course” and “I love my flag and homeland.” Yet, later, after one of them dared to cross the line: “I am proud of being Cuban; but not of my people. Cuba has become a hypocritical place,” the opinions began to flow:

-I would wear a T-shirt with the Cuban flag on it, but not other symbols, like from the Party, or with Che’s face, or that of the Cuban Five.

-I like my country, but I’d like to get to know others.

-I want to travel, not emigrate. But if I find a country I like more than this one, I’d stay.

-Why would I have to lose my citizenship?

-Why can’t I go see my family outside Cuba? I’d like to be able to pay for my own trip?

-Why can’t I freely leave and reenter Cuba?

- Why is it that people in the Developed World are not “if they’ve stayed” somewhere? They live wherever they please for however long they please and don’t have to offer explanations.

Little by little, the concept of nation became revitalized, and the idea that they loved their country gained strength, all the while they felt freer and freer to express themselves. They felt freer from the mandatory allegiance they must express.

-Cuba is unique; it is special.

-I would stay in my country if they treated me like a person.

-If relations with the United States really get resolved, I wouldn’t leave.

-Yes. I’d like to be able to decide what happens in Cuba.

With the exception of the generation that actively participated in the secret wars, or in the Sierra Maestra’s *guerrillas*, or in the changes that came about through the then

nascent revolution (and if they fully accepted the results), subsequent generations have refused to uphold an inalterable canon have felt increasingly excluded from their homeland’s destiny. In Cuba, even social achievements are imposed: internationalist solidarity, the vegetarian campaigns unleashed in the 1990s, and even current campaigns against homophobia. Civic initiative has been totally disempowered. Thus, the real reaction to any good cause is skepticism and resistance. One of the things that most harmed our national identity, and the reason for the current, acknowledge “crisis of values,” was the eradication of religious thought. Another thing was the loss of gains made in the area of animal protection, which is at this very moment a motive for struggle for the approval of a law that would be only the first step towards civility. Media attention to the Spanish and African cultures has totally displaced any sense of identification with native population, even though some scholars claim that the legacy of our original ancestors was not quite so primitive, and that their culture was evolving: consciousness of a divine origin that leads to a divine state. This concept is viscerally missing in the nation-State that began after 1959. In their current state, even eventually officially acknowledged religions like the Catholic or Yoruba faiths are not able to detain or reverse the spiritual and moral degradation that is plaguing the country. Why? Because the very dogma of the former excludes the esoteric aspect that superior states of consciousness offer, while the second suffers because its practices produce cruelty to animals and suspicion, and not solidarity, regarding one’s neighbors. The first is caught in struggle for political power; the second, exploited as a tourist destination that has become a symbol of social

hierarchy. Either one's regenerative power has been weakened. Another form of profound, anthropological harm has come about as the result of the naturalization of lies and the legitimation of vulgarity as synonymous with Cubanness. No matter the country, extreme levels of baseness are not symbolic of nationality.

### *What is Cuba?*

Paradoxically, Cubans do not feel proud of their country or of the way they are treated therein; they feel pride in themselves. Being Cuban implies an indefinite and indefinable condition that goes beyond any standardized and exploited image such as, for example, the one found in our native cinema. The ostentatious stereotype that was promoted to tourists for so many years was part of a desperate market strategy for survival: sex, dance, and elation.

### *Thinking on Cuba (Yasser)*



At their very core, Cubans know they are “special,” even if that singularity results in them generating a defense mechanism for dealing with continuing crises, their ferocious adaptation due to which they have lost a large part of their humanity. Even if they react against poverty, which appears to be their fate, and against indoctrination, which one sees in their rejection of popular symbols, they instinctively separate out what is rightfully theirs, whether it is an abstraction or a dream. Words like “dialogue,” “transition,” and “conciliation” crop up ever more increasingly in that virtual country: the Internet. Even official rhetoric has found it necessary to incorporate words to keep up with things: “progress,” “sustainability,” “respect for diversity.” “Down with difference,” demand Maikel Extremo and *La Alianza*. There are two rap projects whose platform is the rebelliousness of alternative art, where the Cuban flag *has been* used fully and totally consciously.

*Casa Cuba*, *Cuba Posible* are slogans that circulate that denote an intention of consensus, to which adjectives like “participatory” or even the demonized “democratic” are added. This creates a more flexible language, an important difference after decades in which there was only space for opposites and radicalisms. The objective projection of that imagined Cuba has been attempted, particularly in Miami, but it can only become a complete reality in a space that offers the confluence that is already expected, not so much due to questionable economic and political openness, but as a result of a process of exhaustion. More like a natural need than reasoned hope. That space of true plurality among Cubans on the island and those dispersed throughout the world is unquestionably the legacy of all for whom this island is still important, without exception.

# Young Identities

Marcia Cairo  
Havana, Cuba

There are three predominant social groups among Cuban adolescents and youth: *Mikis*, *Frikis* and *Reparteros* (barrio boys). They predominate due to their characteristics, forms of conduct, and preferences. The first group is called the *Mikis*. Many of these youth come from well-to-do families (by Cuban standards) and stand out because they are well dressed, with a mix of elegant style and fashionable practicality. The guys wear suit jackets and sneakers, the girls, short skirts or short and heels. Those who stand out among them are known as *hijos de papá* (children of managers, famous musicians, high military officials, owners of lucrative businesses, etc.): they can buy brand name perfumes and clothes, and move about in cars or motorbikes. Those with less money try to keep up with their wealthier cohort and pressure their parents to look as though they have a status they don't really have. They listen to pop and electronic music, and frequent discos. Lately, they've begun to hang out at the *Fábrica de Arte Cubano* (a new arts location), but they are hardly interested in the exhibits: they get together there to socialize, drink, and smoke. Their conversations can be characterized as having a touch of sophisticated banality. The second group is the *Frikis*, who love the night, regularly dress in black and wear boots. They have tattoos, and dark accessories in their hair and on their

wrists. They tend to stay up all night, talking in parks while laying on the ground or grass, talking about simple things as though they were deep meditations. Rock music is their favorite music, and they love going to concerts. Over past decades, they've been stigmatized for their experimentation with hallucinogenic substances. Members of this subset of them are known as the *Emos*. These are immature youth who celebrate depression, introversion, and sorrow. Some of them even self-inflict pain, scratching and cutting their skin, but these are a minority. Most of them are more interested in what is in fashion, for example, wearing multicolored, tight clothing, and high-top, *Converse All Stars*. They wear their hair straight and smooth, with bangs covering part of their faces. *Emos* tend to practice a form of silly, purposeless rebellion, and favor social isolation to distance themselves from their studies and families. They like alternative rock, pop punk, post-hardcore, and other musical subgenres. Others are the inheritors of the *Emo* movement that cropped up in the United States during the 1980s; they created their own subculture based on music bands. *Frikis* and *Emos* are attracted to wristbands, rings, and nose, brow and lip piercings. To be respectable, they must dress well: they cannot look badly dressed or not having certain kinds of

clothes such as boots or high-top sneakers, and skinny jeans.

The *Reparteros* are the third group. They are less well looked upon and live in marginal neighborhoods and have an impoverished family background. Mainstream society associates criminal and illegal economic activities with them. They tend to wear caps, homemade shoes, cuffed up pants, tight pullover shirts, and hip bags. They wear their hair extravagantly, shaved at the sides, and tall or flattened in the middle.

They can sometimes have tongue and lower lip piercings. They frequent cheap discos (where the price is 1 CUC), where *reguetón* is played. They travel on buses while playing that music at top volume, and incite social disorder by bothering passengers with extremely irreverent and *machista* song lyrics full of vulgar language that denigrates women as sexual objects. Some carry knives or blades, which are a sign of power and security.

# *Art and its Trinity*

David Escalona Carrillo (David D'Omni)

Plastic and music artist (Rap/Hip hop)

Havana, Cuba

*Beautifying and creating are related qualities of an outer shell and its core.  
There is a trinity in art: beauty, creation, a union between beauty and creation.*

**T**o create beauty requires talent: to create, inspiration: to unite beauty and creation, genius. All artists move within this trinity. Some beautify, others create, but rarely does one find a genius that borders on insanity or risks the pyre. Beautifying does not always guarantee creating, and beauty makes it possible to stereotype it. Creating does not always guarantee beautification; it is possible to see that many of those who create, do so while floating among concepts and lacking in beauty. Both are valid and necessary experiences, both can tug at a heartstring, but without a lack of that trinity, we could say they were artisanal, science, civility, politics or sports. Art is grandiose, total, and powerful, when it is born as a sincere scream from the soul, and does not pretend, fear, or overwhelm with majestic strangeness: it is banal, hollow, and sterile when it pretends, fears, and does not overwhelm. This is why it is hard to find art in places with homogenizing tendencies and excess controls, where populism trumps while disguised as contemporary fashion, party

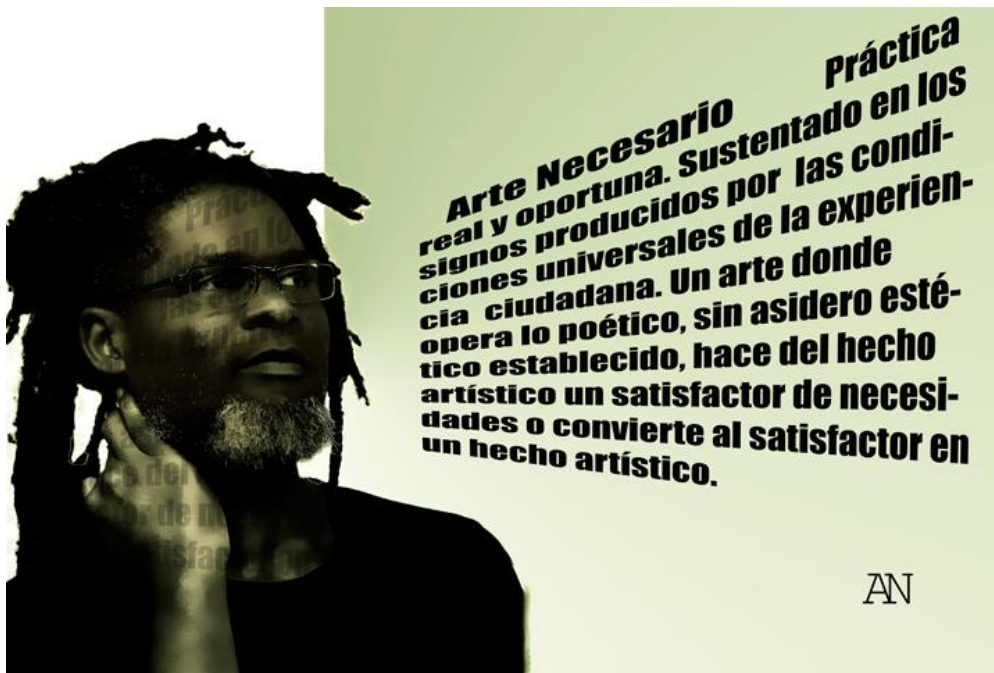
or religion. I can't shake a certain sadness I feel when I view the work of artists who besides talent have genius too, but hide it for fear or convenience, and attack anything called Art. I feel a wound-like pain when real artists fall into the clutches of censorship for having shown signs of real courage and raise the name of art on high. I feel involuntary apathy and deafness when I am surrounded by something incorrectly called art praises governments, self-censors, incites unmeasured patriotism, and separation: it clones itself over and over to exalt insatiable appetites, is homogenous and, of course, is not born, but rather produced through imitation or obeys orders. I feel great pleasure and deep gratitude to the essence of life when I can enjoy true, sincere and valiant art, art that is irreverent, critical, strange, wild, transcendent, ascendant, free and freeing. We are linguistic beings and need to name things despite relativity. I say this so as not to establish limits on what beauty, creation, or the union of both is. But I thought it just to expose this trinity because

authoritarianism, censorship, and self-censorship are digging deep into our cultures and are making it necessary to clarify that if it is due to convenience or fear of presidents, producers, editors, critics, religious leaders, partisans, or institutions of any sort that arts is not born from within, it is not inspiring nor does it beautify with total, formal or conceptual freedom. Instead of art, it is nothing more than clown makeup, and will continue dumbing down and homogenizing people for centuries to come. Amen. When the trinity of art is attained, the road becomes shorter, the suffering of many lives becomes concentrated in one, and with peaceful armor forged from courage and profound love, the true artist transcends and ascend in order to take with him or her two prizes: an exterior one and an interior one.

In most cases, the exterior one is incomprehension, anonymity, censorship, envy, ingratitude, insanity, martyrdom, and posthumous fame: the interior one is freedom, pleasure, joy, love, peace, inspiration, and never-ending light. That is the destiny of all people: the artist simply relaxes, accepts it, and faces it with courage. Most others spend their lives running from the inevitable and take only the external prize, illness and death.

# *Necessary Art: Amaury Pacheco Speaks to Us About His Post-OMNI Experience*

Yania Suárez  
Writer  
Havana, Cuba



**Q: When do you start to create Necessary Art?**

**A:** Necessary Art is a recent name within my artistic trajectory. The first hints of this singular art practice emerged when I was active with OMNI, since 2009, but really at the end of that year. It wasn't called that because we were in other circumstances and involved with other tendencies for which to talk about our art: Total Art,

Performance, Poetic Action, Life Art. We were focused on social life, on interacting with public spaces, on solving the conflicts and discovering the zones of silence generated at the level of social life in society. What I was able to see was that we supported each other on three, principal points: the poetic, the social, and need. For example, we did a



performance that consisted of putting chairs on walls. At that time, there were many bus stops in Alamar with no benches to sit on when waiting. We took chairs and did a poetry reading at the bus stop for a few hours. The action generated a sharing of opinions in which municipal government agents, police, and everyday citizens, participated. That is when I realized that our art was capable of creating “satisfactors”: means with which to satisfy a need.

**Q:** What kinds of needs?

**A:** There are different need groupings: physiological ones, regarding safety, affiliation, acknowledgment and self-realization; but in reality, those are impediments to determining them. They do not come about on their own; but they are linked. With Necessary Art, we are able to satisfy all sorts of needs, since the possibilities are endless, but it mainly focuses on needs that could be defined as social.

**Q:** Are you now making Necessary Art on your own?

**A:** In my particular case, when I finished up working with OMNI, I started to work on Necessary Art.

**Q:** So, is OMNI finished?

**A:** Yes, after 18 hours of working with the group, I decided to end what for me was a period of intense expression and learning, not just as a creator, but in my life, too.

**Q:** So, how would you define Necessary Art?

**A:** Necessary Art is a real and opportune practice. Here’s my more elaborate definition: a practice sustained by signs

that produce the universal conditions of citizens’ experiences. It is art in which the poetic operates free of any pre-established, aesthetic underpinnings; it causes the artistic act to be a “satisfactor” of needs or converts the “satisfactor” into an artistic act.

**Q:** What is a “satisfactor”?

**A:** It is the entire process that allows us to satisfy a personal need. In areas like economics and psychology, they talk about the “satisfactor” so long as there is a need to fill. These needs can be from basic to extremely sophisticated. A need is the point of departure in a search for a “satisfactor”; it is the motivation for starting along a path to growth, to evolution. Needs find solutions, in and of them selves, have the will to reveal how they can be resolved.

**Q:** Could you give me an example?

**A:** There is a recent one originating from the need for housing my wife, my children, and I have. We began to see an opportunity to penetrate a house based upon the tacit and hidden, Cuba movement of being *Okupas* (the Occupy Movement; occupiers; squatters). People who do this are not called *Okupas* here, but they are folks who squat in apartments. We checked this situation out and moved into an apartment that had been abandoned 8 years ago. Due to technical issues and governmental decisions, it was in a state of legal limbo. “State factors” intervened and threatened us with eviction. We turned to a few procedures—primarily legal ones—and also began to create strategies that came right out of art.

**Q:** What were they?

**A:** There were strategies we had worked on within OMNI, for example, how to use publicity—which is essential to these social struggles—and some visualization techniques involving performative and poetic experiences. We used all the elements people used in their social environment to defend themselves, promote their rhetoric, simply subvert their meaning to an aesthetic projection and denomination. All this was documented. From a legal point of view, we documented all the answers we offered, and the answers the authorities offered us. In the end, we had an expository space with documents, photos of the house, drawings by our children, and even of how we coexisted in that space. It would be like the final phase of a process, but what interests me is more procedural, where the forces are intervening.

**Q:** Does that process of occupying the house have a title?

**A:** Yes. “La casa que no existía” [The House That Did Not Exist]. It starts to exist when we began to work on it and we receive a water service contract, an electric service contract. “La casa que no existía” is a poem narrated in real time, by real protagonists defending from within a same reality.

**Q:** How long have you been doing this?

**A:** More or less since 2011. Necessary Art also creates artistic resources and techniques that solve specific problems.

**Q:** What do you mean by that?

**A:** For example, we offered the *Damas de Blanco* (Ladies in White) a self-

representation and self-expression workshop involving psycho physical exercises and theatrical techniques. Their scene is quite powerful: they dress all in white, carry Gladioli, are women, and are beaten. It is like a *Via Crucis*, an image that impacts public space. Yet, upon looking at this carefully, we realized that we were before a performative condition and theatrical props.

**Q:** Who see it that way?

**A:** My wife Iris and I. When we worked with them, we tried to help them observe themselves, to achieve greater self-representation, and we began to polish their image via a number of psycho physical exercises and theatrical techniques.

**Q:** But, do they think of their activism as performance?

**A:** No, but Necessary Art can help them incorporate techniques for their activism. The poetic is at the core of my experience. I am a poet, a user of poetry. I have used the poetic system in a way that is entirely against the grain of Lezama Lima’s view of it. He did not expect any application value to poetry, but was looking for “a broadening of it that might stretch the poetic image all the way to the horizon.” For Lezama Lima, the protest in 1930, death of Trejo, and image of Mella tearing down Zayas’ statue in front of the Presidential Palace marked the beginning of a history of “infinite possibilities” in the republican era.

When I see the *Damas de Blanco* in public spaces or at civic society protests, fighting for a democratization of Cuban life, I see an “Imago” that reestablishes its potential.

Just a few steps beyond that are operative poetics: contributing, acting, empowering and infinitely make possible that this democratic space, and that image, survive and multiply.

# *The Influence of Afro-Cuban Religious Systems and Practices in Cuban Contemporary Art*

José Clemente Gascón Martínez  
M Sc., plastic artist, and art critic  
Havana, Cuba

The period that unexpectedly followed the so-called *quinquenio gris* (a five-year period of intense censorship) developed under an even more rigid ideo-aesthetic guise than there was before, especially after the declarations of the First Education and Culture Congress (1971) were made. These imposed heavily laden, non-artistic, evaluative precepts, particularly in the area of art promotion. Given this context, the innumerable retreats from certain subjects are perfectly understandable, whether due to censorship or self-censorship on the part of artists themselves, in an attempt to avoid problems with the cultural authorities for touching upon subjects that could lead to troublesome interpretations. Although there was no official style or tendency dictated, the congress generation a stereotyped form of cultural production akin to ideological propaganda. As a result, it established authorization for measures to be taken

against many intellectuals and artists for political, ideological, or moral reasons, among these the writer Reinaldo Arenas and Virgilio Piñera, and painters Manuel Mendive and Tomás Sánchez. They were cautiously separated from their sources of work because they were not Marxists, and because they were decadent, *petit bourgeois*, homosexuals, or religious. Among the victims of censorship, Antonia Eiriz, Humberto Peña, and Santiago “Chago” Armada are among the most dramatic cases: they protested in silence and sacrificed the important thing for an artist: they ceased painting. Other valiant artists continued on with their work, often not being able to exhibit them; others modified their form of expression due to history’s everyday pressures. Servando Cabrera doubled his efforts: one of his works was on the moment’s revolutionary epic, the other a personalized, homoerotic piece.



**Antonia Eiriz, *La Anunciación*, oil on cloth (1963)**

Antonia was determined “conflictive,” since her works’ essential trait expressed the other reality of that historic moment, contrary to the praiseful topics artworks should embrace. From 1968 on, she found herself pressured to stop painting; she locked herself up in her home for more than 20 years, and remained far from institutional dynamics in which she had been involved. There she took on less conflictive creative projects. Many years later, and quite by chance, she turned up in the Juanelo neighborhood, on the outskirts of Havana. She was involved in a series of popular art workshops and with community people. They fostered the Cuban *Papier Maché* school (Meira 1998). Nearly in the twilight of her life, she responded to a question regarding the past, present, and posterity, that had for too long gone unanswered: “When they said those things to me about my painting being conflictive, I eventually believed it. My

work *La tribuna* was going to receive a prize, but didn’t, due to the criticism. One day, for the first time in a long time, I saw my paintings all together, and said to myself: these are paintings that express the moment in which I live. If a painter can express the moment in which he or she lives, it is genuine. So, I absolved myself.” (Fernández 2013:35). The topic of religion was one of the most visibly implicated in the exclusions of that era. Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as Spiritualism, and syncretic practices of African origin, due to their popular origins, were extolled as folklore inherited from a long colonial and neocolonial process. They were understood as authentic obstacles to the social ideal of the time. This ensured that intellectuals whose work delved deeply into traditional and popular religiosity became subject to arbitrary, institutional restrictions and preferences, which favored officialdom and those who sang

the praises of the changes brought about by atheistic ideology. The natural evolution of diverse forms of cultural expression was repressed; they were in disfavor as a result of the fragmented presence of topics relevant to the subject. The new proposals for art that erupted on the plastic arts scene around 1981 a new era in the country's historical artistic process. They were in keeping with much less agreed upon economic, political, social and cultural realities. Other thematic interests cropped up that attempted to subvert the apologetic and superficial tones associated with identity, Cubanness, and popular culture that had been dominant in most the earlier plastic production. These anthropological like, significant aesthetic proposals were oriented towards a will to gain knowledge and consideration of culture's diverse roots in Cuba. This new, critical perspective involved all the social topics at hand and was shaped by the feeling at that moment during which the source of all the social project's errors and failures was acknowledged. This lead to the emergence of a questioning ideology characterized by a critical view of the directions said project had followed. It was a copy of the Soviet model that had

buried liberal-like, nationalist thought based since its origins in its own view of our nationality's cultural identity.

Not only did the topic of everyday life emerge in the content of this art, and daily conflicts regarding sexual orientation, or issues specific to the art world such as legitimation, reception, and censorship, but it also played an important role in history, the view of heroism, and the treatment of patriotic and religious symbols. The fundamental, analytical base that had already been established as essential to artistic practices, inspired deep reflection about the complex activities and topics during the periods between the past and present, political ideology, and religious thought. Some artworks revealed the complexity and irreversibility of processes to mythologize historical personalities and imaginary figures at a popular level. These examples mark a specific moment of inflection towards a new movement within Cuba's sociocultural, historic process. The paradigms imposed by the censorship and laws of the island's *quinquenio gris* are destroyed: a space opens up for religious topics. This was accepted as an aesthetic category after nearly three decades of silence and omissions.



**Rubén Torres Llorca,  
*Esta es tu obra*,  
sculptural installation  
(1989)**

The images in the sculptural installation titled *Esta es tu obra*, by Rubén de Torres Llorca, which was displayed at Havana's *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*, are within a complicated scheme reflective of our roots, like the stepped, pyramid-shaped, classic, commemorative pedestal, numerous protruding niches made to contain countless figurines representing the plentiful, ornamental kitsch of Cuban homes (plaster zoomorphisms and decorations), as well as frequent Indian heads with busts of presumed heroes with unknown faces and extremely popular, religious images that contain the complex worldview of ideologies or creeds. These are multiple foci on the dormant religiosity that are suddenly emerging when the country is going through the worst crisis in its history and survival implies taking greater risks. A large portion of the Cuban people returned to faith as if it were a table offering salvation. It is place for invocation in the midst of all the Special Period's uncertainty. In 1991, the Communist Party approved the participation of its members in any religion; this was backed by a constitutional amendment created by a lay State. In the context of everyday problems, the encounter between heroic

and religious iconography exalts topological cohesion and the attention of political leaders. It brings the gods down to Earth and honors art's critical depth in the work of many plastic artists. Their dissimilar interpretations of the symbols of earthly and spiritual powers celebrated an openly polysemic and problematizing mark on heroic as well as religious iconography within a context known as that of "New Cuban Art."

Some artists who were already initiated in Afro-Cuban religions or shaped at the center of their long-lived traditions delved exponentially deeper into the perspective first utilized by Wilfredo Lam. They restructured the African-inspired worldviews of those religious-cultural complexities with international art's codes. The need to represent one's self has been consonant with the need to become an object, even if via different optics (each artist does so from his or her works' theoretical frameworks). This allows them to reveal themselves or, better yet, propose themselves, as individual beings in which cultural conflicts, particularly racial ones based on an inescapable, assimilated, Eurocentric culture like that of the dominant culture, converge. In the end, these artists are in keeping with those models.



**Juan Moreira, *La virgen del barquito*, acrylic-cloth (2009)**

This interconnectivity of artistic codes in works with directly or indirectly manifested, religious perspective also evoke a relationship with the fate of illegal immigration via de Florida Straits, an activity in which the saints of the African (Yemaya and Oshun) or Catholic (Virgin of Regla or the Virgin of Charity) religious systems were always involved. They had a great deal to do with protection from the water or were guardians of the rickety crafts used to escape, as an alternative or hope for a different life, and much yearned wellbeing, elsewhere. The treatment afforded this particular topic by most artists most often resulted due to their desire, as practitioners of these Afro-inspired, religious traditions, or their interest in using their visual semiotics to reconstruct new poetics and artistic

discourses that contained formal elements and content pertaining to these systems. They incorporated this mode of personal representation taking advantage of the rich source of knowledge, cultural practices, and values, which are themselves have an expressive value in their imaginations through fables, myths, and legends.

In *Altar de San Joseph Beuys* or *Plásticos de todas las sectas uníos*, by Lázaro Saavedra, the installation's broad scene, chock full of ex-votive offerings, allows the artists to offer petitions and gratitude that always allude to the protective or miraculous shelter of art and creators' destinies. This spread of offerings offers an evaluation useful for assessing the contributions of this new artistic exploration, in their own measure.



Lázaro Saavedra, *Plásticos de todas las sectas uníos*, installation (1989)



At the same time, Cuba has the most varied traditions of the entire African Diaspora in the Americas. It has four religious-cultural groupings: Santería (Yoruba), Palo Monte (Kongo), Arará (Ewe-Fon), and the Abakuá secret society (Calabar culture). As the native population was eliminated, the Cuban socio-cultural environment always promoted the “creolizing” integration of immigrants. For centuries, slave workers were imported from Africa, which made it so men and women with these traditions, and the unique Europeanization of the Caribbean, were not differentiated from the rest of the Cubans. Thus, they felt and acted Cuban. Those African attributes that had not dissolved into this new, mixed culture, these core practices, beliefs, customs, and views of reality, are the thematic-cultural center of Afro-Cubanness, and distinguishes those who identify with this culture from the synthesizing form of Cuban culture, which also includes elements of Africanness. These nuclei are not living fossils, but rather evolved components in a new medium across the Atlantic; they are hybrid, inventive, and influential in the construction of the contemporary culture that somehow or another has also been trans-racial since the nineteenth century. In this trans-racial culture, blacks and mulattoes remain at the bottom of the social scale. These new artists were from different, popular, social classes in which they continued immersed, because of how Cuban life is: generalized poverty, a shortage of housing and other resources, social leveling, massification, pseudo-egalitarianism. They were active bearers of folklore and also trained professionals, thanks to the system of free education: many of them created high art modeled from a core of different

values, sensibilities, and views of the world shaped by their popular social groups. Contemporary Cuban art has begun to restructure itself within the intricate dilemmas of globalization and difference in today’s world, a significant process that is expanding sensibilities, aesthetic tastes and values regarding urban, popular culture and even marginal groups that have tended to become increasingly influential in everyday habits. For this same reason, they are acting from within contents, in reality recreating forms, rituals, or myths, as tends to happen among numerous artists engaged in art in the contemporary Caribbean. Cuban plastic art is continuing to create Western culture from within the depths of non-Western culture, transforming it, in a sense, by diversifying contemporary culture. These artists abandoned any obsessive concern with identity, since they really function from within it, and challenge inherited dogma to accept their authenticity and affirm themselves via stories or proclamations that are equally European, indigenous, or African, because they belong to a new breed with a universal vocation, divided in parallel worlds. Since the 1990s, the taking up of this subject has gained true momentum: the rhetoric gets more and more complex; it is transmitted via a series of diverse communicative channels that are concomitantly univocal. They allow for this phenomenon’s analysis as something factual and far from incendiary. The topic is not taken up with a militant or aggressive attitude; instead, it is reflexive and questioning. There is a distancing from simulation, in order to be able to resort to strategies that dominate the rhetoric of the traditionally relegated.

This is how the issues of race and gender—which is deeply rooted in Cuban society—reached their most critical point during the crisis of the 90s, despite the official pronouncement regarding respect for the whole of human dignity and people’s inherent rights regardless their skin color. Official rhetoric did not become aware of these signs at any time; if they don’t invalidate criteria regarding individual proposals, they certainly do reflect an interpretive impartiality that somehow

limits foci and understandings of these specific poetics. Interpreting and speculating about the connotations of any artwork’s topological system presupposes that at some moment in the history of Cuban art the black issue has been conditioned by the events that favored its importance, but in a decidedly picturesque and carnivalesque way that has not joined the problems of the black issue with other social interests regarding development, outside the realm of what is usually associated with blackness.



**Jorge Delgado, *La fuerza del mambí*, acrylic on cloth (1992).**

Various artists render homage to the Abakuá secret society, the legacy of an African ritual traditions linked even to Cuba’s independence wars. It remains intact and admitted white men as early as 1836. *Ekobio Mukarará* means ‘white brother,’ a term that was coined in the Havana’s Cayo Hueso neighborhood in around 1951, in a system of worship that had long belonged to *carabalí* blacks (from Calabar) in Nigeria. The Abakuás have maintained their traditions, representations, and language to such a degree, even today that their descendants

or new members of that first Cuban, secret society in Cuba, and those in Africa, can communicate via the same chants.

The proliferation of criticism that emerged with “New Cuban art” during the 1980s does not make a pronouncement about the black problem. This topic has been disdained for a long time; its recuperation has not enjoyed spaces in which the debate about the worsening issue of inequality for the black population could be legitimized. It saw its own initiative and efforts towards

real progress in all areas of material and spiritual life thwarted. These aspirations were expressed in the words and spirit of legal texts, but were not put into practice in a hindered reality that has existed for more than 400 years. We had to wait until 1997 for some artists to approach the subject as temporary cultivators and others incorporate iconography of Afro-Cuban origin into their styles, through the *Queloides* exhibits at *Casa de África* and *Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales* (CDAV). The curatorial camp continues seeing proposals that articulate thematically novel projects on “blackness,” but many artists assume a tangential focus on it. Others create on the subject within only one area of their production; their approaches often reflect an intertextual relationship with certain, key pieces. This variety of interpretations—which have been transmitted irregularly since their inception—is a definitive, graphic testament to the fact that the Diaspora and its descendants have manifested different or distorted versions of the sex roles, gender, and life of the Orishas that arrived in America. Access to writing was the privative patrimony of men; it was they who were charged with

protecting the meanings of the symbols, and also of genders. These revealed the most sacred, religious relics; the consciousness of this reality has never been able to transform the secular conditions that determine the natural and inevitable condition of women, who accept with prescribed resignation what should never be questioned under any circumstances.



**Belkis Ayón.** *Sikan, Nasako y el Espiritu Santo. Colography (1993).*

**Magdalena Campos Pons.** *Hablando suave con mi madre, video-instalación (1997)*



In *Hablando suave con mi madre*, María Magdalena Campos-Pons explores a vast subject related to the Diaspora, expatriation, gender, and race as part of a series of works titled *Historia de los que no fueron héroes*. This multimedia installation lays out a personal narrative in order to examine the roads history and tradition have taken from generation to generation, and the collective memory that remains preserved in the evocative, everyday objects. Meanwhile, Belkis Ayón induces a certain feminine gaze. The legend of Sikán caught her attention, because of the female character's victimization. But, she treats it from a more gendered position, weighing the connotations and analogies that could be made. The legend's own mystery and its covered meanings in history open up to certain speculation, even if it was never her purpose to reproach the fraternity, but rather the opposite: respect it and promote it in a broader cultural sense.

Marta María Pérez has another way of speaking from her art. She constructs her identity and unmask the mythology regarding gender roles that serve as a basis for discrimination and crossing the profane and the sacred. She uses her body as support for her female voice, especially in facing the conformity of "her assigned place" and the lack of equity in the challenge of "what was always thus, must continue thus." The taboos that persist refer to the negative symbolic origins of menstruation as punishment, a product of curiosity and disobedience: "Your own body's blood!" is a sign of shame, punishment, and repression that completes the association of impurity and the malign effects that limit in the context of sacredness. These aspects present themselves unconsciously and naturally, and have

been popularized within religious expression. Yet, they lead to marginalization and serve as rules of prohibition. As such, they lead to belief in the credibility of the religious story and its trauma, which is invariably accepted within the cosmic system of African origin. The story is desacralized and transgressed by the intimate, private practices of women. Marta María Pérez's work conceptually and polemically reveals the production-reproduction conflict found throughout an entire past of myths, evocative fantasies, archetypes, and transformative rituals surrounding the ancestral figure of woman. It casts a doubt on taboos and clichés that weave popular notions and beliefs at play in the religious practices of *Regla de Ocha* and *Palo Monte*. In work, they are extrapolated in dramatic and aggressive scenes: it is a primitive and authentic ritualism expressed through metaphors and allegories to reveal Africanness as a legacy, through its expressive forms.



**Marta María Pérez, *Más fuertes nos protegen mejor, manipulated* photograph (1995)**

The central axes of their poetics emerge from within an self-referential component that implies their own depository content, to allude to and understand the identity of the “Other,” be it an unknown or close, real or spiritual individual or collectivity.

### **Conclusions**

The work of many creators who take on religious subjects and the issue of blackness in contemporary Cuban society has resulted from various decades of work possessing diverse manifestations that proffer a degree of novel contemporaneity to today’s art in Cuba. It is almost always a reflection on issues that signal the colonial and republican eras, as if these details did not enjoy the due importance in the era of globalization and the Internet. The absence of dialogues regarding all this has not only impeded any profound analysis of how prejudice and discrimination present themselves in daily life today; they persist even more than 400 years of silences and exclusions. Yet, the opportunity to usher in a different dimension is not constrained only due to vocation. It is also necessary to explore these daily human conflicts within the context of the conceptual underpinnings of the philosophical doctrines and liturgical practices that affirm them.

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# *The Secret Rumba*

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*How to speak of a secret without referring to the way we were found out;  
more over, how continues to remain a secret from us?*

María Zambrano, *La Cuba Secreta*, 1948

It was during my first summer in New York. It must have been July or August of 1997. Every Sunday, my wife and I would traverse the Lincoln Tunnel from New Jersey to Manhattan, anxious to encounter one of the city's so many mythical places, starting with the ones that most attract all recently arrived immigrants: the cheapest or, better yet, free ones, like Central Park, Times Square, the Metropolitan Museum, the Natural History Museum, the MoMA, Grand Central Station. One afternoon, we arrived at the Dakota building to see the place Mar Chapman had fired four shots at Beatle John Lennon. At the very least, I expected to find a marker, something with which to satisfy my adolescent fetishism. I had stopped being an adolescent a while back by then but, you know, certain instincts keep thriving for quite a long time. I was disappointed when I found nothing to latch on to till the porter finally took pity on our touristy fervor and if we crossed the street, into Central Park, we'd find sort of monument. Strawberry Field was the name of that little corner of the park where Yoko Ono had spread his ashes. Of course, one begins to hum that song as soon as one sees the sign for it until one realized that the only thing there is to memorialize Lennon—aside from

groups of tourists and hippies with guitars almost as old as they—is a mosaic, on the floor. All it says is “Imagine,” which marks the moment when you change the song you're humming. But, we couldn't keep it up for very long. Amidst the languid notes emanating from the nearly ancient hippies' guitars, all of a sudden, the persistent percussion of drums started interrupting the moment. Despite the prohibition of rock music during my adolescence, which explained its attraction for me, I found this drumming irresistible; its force drew me to it so strongly, like planetary gravity. We found the source by the shore of a small lake where *rumberos* (rumba drummers) were beating their drumheads among more or less clandestine vendors selling beer and tamales. I—who in Cuba had never attended a *bembé* (religious festival) nor gone to a touristy, Saturday Rumba—was awestruck as if I have seen Christ jogging on the lake's water. Yet, they say ‘no,’ that it's all a tradition. That they've been getting together at this place every summer Sunday, for decades, to play mostly Cuban and Puerto Rican rumbas; they did so spontaneously, and with a constancy I had never known in Havana. I was sure there was a story behind that, and I didn't bother to ask about it. When life

gives you surprises, it is better not to ask questions, and just enjoy them.

2. When María Zambrano spoke about a secret Cuba, as part of her reaction to Lezama's poetry, she didn't seem to need to refer to the other Cuba, the public one, as it seemed so obvious to her. This was the Cuba associated with the clearest symbols of its existence or, put differently, with its tourist attractions—tobacco, sugar, beaches, and popular music. Of course, this last item is indirectly mentioned as a reference to poet Nicolás Guillén, “with his indelible rhythm.” That secret Cuba is not “images, not a living abstraction of palms and their environment, nor a way of being in the space of people and things, but rather their shadow, their secret weight, their measure of reality.” Too literal a reading of this reasoning or other similar forms of thought have been

creating a growing vacuum regarding that very obvious Cuba, whether or not they are sophisticated forms of racism or not. That Cuba has been so fondled by tourism that it is often mistaken with its landscape to the point that its obviousness starts to make it invisible, as happens in Poe's famous story. The result is that today we are the opposite of those secrets enunciated by Zambrana. For every more or less serious project on the rumba, there are three or four dedicated to examining some aspect of infinitely limited *Orígenes* group's phenomenon. Given its unproductive results, what is truly sad about this is that the insistence upon seeing them (rumba and *Orígenes*) as opposites, as if they were not equally essential manifestations of one same reality.



3. In this sense, the documentary “*clave blen blen blen*” filmed by Arístedes Falcón Paradí for over four years one must assume where arduous and enriching, is a huge revelation that has been affirmed by the enthusiastic multitudes that have gone to see it at its few public showings in the very city it was filmed, New York. It reveals not only the complex process of how this music, rooted as it is in a different climate, culture, and social way of being, but also offers the essential keys to understanding a phenomenon as complex as the rumba. It explores its musical dimensions but also reviews its history, and social, ethnic, national, racial, religious and other origins, too. ‘Knowledge’ and ‘confidence’ are key words for understanding the success Falcón has had delving into the dense and elusive jungle of the rumba universe in foreign lands. These words can be reduced to just one: time. An amount of time equal to an entire lifetime, which is what Arístedes Falcón has needed to be able to see both the forest and the trees. He has had to see, more than understand or try to explain, because one needs a great deal of wisdom, which is like saying a great deal of humility to realize, as María Zambrano said, that “true secrets do not allow themselves to be revealed,” but instead allow themselves to be examined and even captured via successive intuitions. It helps, for example, that the documentary’s flexible, unstructured nature groups together all the aforementioned dimensions and allows them to coexist comfortably. It is drawn along by offering vignettes to the different Orishas. This allows for one to understand how the rumba phenomenon can be simultaneously spectacular and intimate, *machista* and feminine,

endemic and exportable, sectarian, marginal and intractable for some, and open to the sensitivity of (certain) Venezuelans, Puerto Ricans, French people, Japanese people; painters, sculptors, cooks, classical guitar players and Yale academics. More than just a cultural element or cipher trapped in its own exoticism or veneration, the rumba presents itself to us like an artifact capable of continuously generating and acquiring new meanings. The documentary seems wonderfully to always suggest much more than it actually says about its vitality and survival.

4. Early at the beginning of the Cuban nation as an individual or collective pipe dream, New York was a destination for some of the island’s greatest names in its intellectual and cultural history—e.g., Heredia, Varela, Villaverde, Martí, Ignacio Cervantes—and site of production of its most recognizable icons—e.g., the flag, national emblem, the periodicals *El Habanero* and *Patria*, *Cecilia Valdés*, *Versos Sencillos*, and the Cuban Revolutionary Party. The rumba’s presence cannot be traced so far back in the city or its environs; but the relevance of its heroes and their actions can be. The song “*clave blen blen blen*” needs nothing more than to establish its myth of origin with Chano Pozo, and his brief but stellar contribution to the redefinition of bebop, first, and then of jazz, in its entirety. It is enough for it to refer to essential figures in the history of rumba and Latin jazz like the musicians Cándido Camero, Patato Valdés and Mongo Santamaría to demand that history tell of its cardinal place in the evolution of Cuban and even universal music, and all the possible recombinations it made possible. In the case of Cuban rumba in New York, it



was an evolution that did not stop when the mambo reached the peak of its popularity, or rumba or bebop, but that has been nurtured by new additions like

that of Orlando “Puntilla” Ríos, David Oquendo, Román Díaz, Pupy Insua, and Pedrito Martínez, *rumberos* who offer direct testimony in the documentary.



*Rita and Pedrito*

These names when taken into consideration with those the two Nuyorican musicians Jerry González and Abraham Rodríguez, Jr., and other, lesser known ones without whom it is impossible to talk about the presence and persistence of rumba on the shores of the Hudson, are key to the history of rumba on the island of Manhattan and other adjacent territories, an to the documentary’s narrative. They are bearers of an ancient wisdom that has been marginalized a thousand times over, and they proclaim this proudly. They have received much more and more frequent recognition in New York than in their birthplaces. René López, the film’s producer and historian, is responsible for establishing that it was in New York where the rumba is first recorded “in its natural style, with

percussion and a singer, and nothing more.” “This had not even been done in Cuba because there was so much prejudice against the rumba.” New York is a place where many *rumberos* have found themselves finally appreciated for their true worth: this explains why so many came to the city or its outskirts to live at some point in their lives. Paradigmatically, what becomes increasing clear throughout the documentary is that many of the area’s still living *rumberos* came during the Mariel Boatlift, as part of that “*scoria*” (riffraff) that the Cuban Revolution got rid of to more energetically pursue a bright future. This future ended up being more like a degraded notion of a certain past in which various, historic and even contradictory objects were revered (who could have told Che Guevara that he

would end up being a capitalistic tourist icon, just like old Chevrolets?). This contrasts sharply with the rumba tradition, which draws equally from a reverential respect for the dateless history of their ancestors and those “discarded elements of the future” in order to exist like an eternal present.

These affirmations, like Martí’s line about the “the rebellious and brutal north that despises us,” have become more attractive than the country, itself, which could end up being ironical, if the *rumberos* were truly interested in irony, a pastime for people who live in time, in history, and not in the rumba’s eternity.

5. When Pedrito Martínez is asked to define the rumba, at the beginning of the documentary, he responds by singing a self-reflexive rumba: “*The rumba is not the danzón/that has notes that are clear/it looks for a better tone/can be your inspiration/searching for better tones/searching for illustration/and the highest of honors.*” Put differently, the rumba does not reject either the elegance or its particular desire to transcend, despite its light and spontaneous gestures.

6. As we all know—all except those bent on embracing a totally opposite view—distance makes things greater. As soon as the tangible referent disappears, there is an image that takes its place. It doesn’t have to deal with uncomfortable reality; it just shines with the increasing brilliance of something imagined. Yet, I’d like to think that this is not what happened in the case of the *La Esquina Habanera* [Havana Corner]. It was already a big deal on its own, quite obviously, and not through nostalgia’s exaggerated lens. Mentioning the *Esquina Habanera* is like saying Rumba Sundays, as if the rest of the week (and life) didn’t matter. I arrived at the

*Esquina Habanera*, a bar in Union City, New Jersey (the location of my first apartment in the United States) for the first time because Ramón Caballero took me there. He was a 1994 *balsero* (rafter) who had ended up creating a bookstore-cum-cultural Fort Apache in the heart of Queens. This happened in 1997, a year after *La Esquina* opened up, and everything was simultaneously strange and quite natural. The place was controlled by the aesthetic and ethics of certain *marielitos*: people that would be impossible to find in the 1990’s Havana they had left behind, as if taken out of a time machine that travelled from two decades back. These were men dressed impeccably all in white, with creases in their pants that were as precise as their good manners and alien space. This detailed care suggested myriad possibilities of violence any time someone crossed certain limits, intentionally or accidentally. Yet, I never saw even the least bit of aggression, a luxury for those who are unaware of certain codes. I also didn’t see many drunkards; much less unaccompanied women. Once I took an American, female friend and presented her as “my wife,” a word I don’t even use with my own real spouse, perhaps because of its possessive overtones. I later had to explain to my friend that it was the only word that would keep guys who might otherwise be overwhelming at bay. I think she understood. There, in a world where everything that happened seemed to have been choreographed by certain rules I doubt existed as purely in the Havana to which the bar’s name alluded, I met a large number of the *rumberos* who feature prominently in Arístedes Falcón’s documentary. That was where I first saw David Oquendo and Vicente Sánchez, the responsible

principals of the *Raíces Habaneras* project (a group under whose name those Sunday *rumberos* performed) who made sure the project made sense. I also met Gene Golden there, as well as dancer Pupy Insua, José “El Chino” Real, and Román Díaz. One time there, I was surprised to hear the voice of a very young Pedro Martínez (unless, in contrast, that voice made him seem even younger than he was, sometime before he was discovered to the great percussionist he is). The size of the audience could vary from Sunday to Sunday, but not the veneration with which the music was received; despite its origin and profane nature, it was also the core of a sort of religion. “On Sundays this is our church,” expresses Oquendo at some moment in the film. I was not the most devoted of their followers, but neither was I the least enthusiastic of them. I went to the *Esquina Habanera* a bunch of times, but despite this they don’t seem like too many. *La Esquina Habanera* was a nocturnal version of the year-long rumbas that took place in Central Park, although the barriers between the drummers and their audience were much more marked, in part because exile is a compact model of one’s original society, and all its different levels come closer together, in part, due to the nature of these spaces. Both the Central Park rumba and *La Esquina Habanera*, in its time, have occupied a cultural and social space equidistant from the intimate and domestic rumba found in tenement yards, and spectacular and touristy films and ethnography. This is where the documentary makes it a point to reveal the very first encounter of the Cuban and African *abakuas*, as if to add magic to an already magical circle. The Central Park rumba and *La Esquina Habanera* helped

create a more accessible, space; in its own way it created a space more respectful of the rumba’s essence. This issue of its essence can be a fearful thought, if it is adopted too seriously. Fortunately, the rumba’s seriousness is childlike: no matter how intense, its fun-loving and naïve nature will save it from any fanaticism.

7. I have quoted this text from Nobel winner Derek Walcott elsewhere:

In serious cities, in grey, militant winter with its short afternoons, the days seem to pass by in buttoned overcoats, every building appears as a barracks with lights on in its windows, and when snow comes, one has the illusion of living in a Russian novel, in the nineteenth century, because of the literature of winter. So visitors to the Caribbean must feel they are inhabiting a succession of postcards. Both climates are shaped by what we have read of them. For tourists, the sunshine cannot be serious. . . . Sadly, to sell itself, the Caribbean encourages the delights of mindlessness, of brilliant vacuity, as a place to flee not only winter but that seriousness that comes only out of culture with four seasons.” To see the images of these musicians protected in the white winter coat while they unload their instruments from a car’s trunk, under intense snowfall, as if they were going to a religious feast, like knights preparing for a crusade, forces us to consider the tragic, tropical tropic alluded to by the music and dance. At the very least, we must accept the superficial joy of the drum, when wrought from the “natural” environment of postcards, and their inability to do anything other than to fulfill their mission of existing, which is much more serious than it might seem.

8. “*clave blen*” begins and ends with two concerts: one in Central Park, in

New York, and another at a theater, with an audience made up almost entirely of children. The park concert—along with the film’s concert—ends with an outburst of joy from the children, right before the camera. “The only difference between the street rumba and a theatrical one is that in the theatrical one you have to respect the director,” says *rumbero* Román Díaz. But it doesn’t matter where it is: “when it comes time for the *rumbero* to play, he is trapped by the rumba’s magic.” It is strange that in a documentary as polyphonic as “*clave blen...*” everyone, the musicians, scholars, audience, all seem to know exactly what they are talking about, no matter how elusive the topic they want to define is—nothing more or less than the importance of rumba in their lives. Some try to describe it as the “freest and most special way to express who you are.” If singer Ángel Guerrero says (yes, these *rumberos* can be just that symbolic), the represents the secular side of Abakua dance and music, Professor Robert Ferris Thompson, whose definitions shape the documentaries’ strongest points, explains that “black Cubans never forgot the essence of “Abakua [dance], which is speaking silently, according to God.”

It may seem contradictory to island *rumberos* that there is no document of the caliber and ambition of “*clave blen...*” I say “it may seem” because the reality is perfectly explainable, if one considers the mix of hypocrisy, racism, and inferiority complex that characterizes official culture in Cuba (and by osmosis, a large part of extra-official culture), which preaches a cult to nationalism and egalitarianism, when in reality it practices the most vulgar and limited forms of elitism, which are not rich in anything other than disdain. What would be logical is that a valuable testimony like “*clave blen...*” came on the scene not only in a place where *rumberos* are more conscious of their own value, but also when they have been distanced from everything in their beings—no matter individual or national—is secondary; they have no closer interlocutor than their deities or their own spirituality which is essentially one and the same thing.

# *Essential* IDENTIDADES

Manuel Cuesta Morúa

The journal *IDENTIDADES* has an impact. If the journal *ISLAS* was a rich, dense space in which to situate Cuba's Afro-descendants at the center of a reflection abandoned decades ago, *IDENTIDADES* has done even

more to ensure that our concerns about racial and ethnic invisibility are heard beyond and more efficiently than they were before. It also does this with agility.



**Presentation of *IDENTIDADES* at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus**

*ISLAS* did very well in its gathering of a treasure trove of ideas about the multi-dimensional problems that affect Cuban Afro-descendants. Yet, it was limited by seeming focused (stuck) on a kind of thinking that did not necessarily guarantee its success and might only interest only two types of readers: those affected by the problem (and not really all of them) and specialists in the area. In

a context in which the issue of race is culturally, historically, and politically is denied, creating a journal whose intention was to singularly focus on that one topic did not end up being strategic. As such, the issue and its critical consideration was not really accessible to people used to thinking that racism in Cuba was a thing of the past—if it was.

*IDENTIDADES* offers a much more appealing and interesting focus. It does so by taking on a name that has more to do with something much more essential than the previous journal's name. The ambiguity in the name *IDENTIDADES* captures the essence of its focus. The issue of race is still present in the publication, but its treatment is less harshly. It also shares space with other issues and problems, and does so with in a way that is organic and allows readers to understand it and connect it to other areas of our reality on a more global level. It's not only about Cuba, but also Latin America, the United States and, hopefully, Europe, Asia and the Middle East, someday. These are places where racism looks different, behaves at other levels, and affects other identities. Issue number 5 of *IDENTIDADES* is very varied in content, but not a variety publication. In it, racial inequality is dealt with from the vantage point of civil society. For example, civil society is the focus of José Hugo Fernández's article, but also that of another article, by Juan A. Madrazo Luna (National Coordinator of the Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration), although his is centered on inequality via images, or postcards from Havana, as he calls them. Other views of race and poverty come to us via the video work of young editor Surelys Vega Isás, and Eric F. Toledo Acevedo (who is white). They captured brief stories and present them to us through their own experiences. Another articles artfully contrasts the black and white world of dominoes with the racism

present in Antilla, located in the heart of one of the eastern provinces where racism does not let up. Without forgetting its focus, *IDENTIDADES* continues opening up to other important realities, and I'd like to stop here and focus on one of them: the importance of democracy and, more specifically, deliberative democracy as a model and tool for deepening the democratization of societies. In this sense, *IDENTIDADES* has taken a lead within any political conversation on the topic. It is the first Cuban publication that has dared to open its pages to a discussion about democracy's political definition and citizen participation, one that is hard to find in Latin America or around the world, but not in the United States. In addition, it is doing so in collaboration with one of its renowned, U.S. promoters, Professor Robert Cavalier, from Carnegie Mellon University, in Pittsburgh, PA. Cavalier is currently working on the advantages of the protocols of deliberative democracy for the conversation about constitutional reform that is taking place in Cuba. The way I see it, *IDENTIDADES* took a bold and polemical step when it opened itself up to an issue that has not yet become a topic in Cuba, but that I consider crucial to Cuba's democratic future. If the problem of democracy in our country is structural, and not due impairment, then it is better to start not where other deficient, global democracies are ending, but rather by deepening and proposing anew democracy itself, if it is to prevail as the least bad way for human affairs to

be governed. This new proposal has a name: it is deliberative democracy. This can be translated as more citizen participation, in a pluralist context, and includes everything from consensus regarding the basic rules of any debate, to ensuring that conversations are informed. Given his experience, Fernando Palacio Mogár, a Cuban political leader who works on constitutional debate, also approaches deliberative democracy in a simple, elegant text that is quite accessible for the journal's readers. Thus, *IDENTIDADES* continues to explore diverse approaches to the issue of differences, privileging broad, cross-cultural representation. Consummate intellectual Armando Soler says as much in his discussion of nostalgias related to immigration, lives of pain, wonder, and denial, as does Eleanor Calvo Martínez, a young woman who speaks to us from her own experience and social sphere about the risks present in today's Cuban society. Similarly, there is engineer Natividad Soto Kessel, a devoted artisan ceramicist, who dares to share with us her concerns and experiences, and aspects of society that shock her. There are two striking articles in this issue, the first on the topic of gays, narrated in the best way possible, through a testimony about the rawness of Cuban sociology; the second, about racism in places other than Cuba, in this case, in the United States and Argentina. The latter focus come to us from the pen of Bonita Lee Penn, Editorial Director of Pittsburgh's Soul Pitt Media, and Pablo Cirio, who

works diligently on the invisibility and invisibilization of Afro-descendants in Argentina (which has considered itself the region's European, advanced center, for many years). Pablo Cirio examines this expertly through the legacy of music. Similarly, Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas deals competently with the topic and its manifestation in Cuban rap music, as does musician David D'Omni, who approaches from within music and its society, and Kenya C. Dworkin, in her substantial, essential exploration of it in Cuban literature, which helps us understand the racism present in the negation of this community. A thorough review of this issue would never end. I would like to end my praise of the journal by celebrating its inclusion of topics regarding Latin America's contemporary reality, which are always important to us Cubans so we might understand things from other perspectives and other, contrasting realities. We Cubans increase and improve our visibility through the work by Colombian Michel J. Ovalle, and the perspective of Peruvian Afro-descendants. For this, and more, I continue expressing my gratitude for and to *IDENTIDADES*.

\* Paper presented at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. Published courtesy of *Cubanet*.

# *IDENTIDADES: The Democracy That's On Its Way*

José Hugo Fernández

**W**e have not yet taken enough time to consider the fact that the journal *IDENTIDADES* is currently functioning as a turning point because it delivers its totally anti-racist and anti-discriminatory content to Cuban readers all over the island. It is a publication whose specialized profile, editorial stance, and professionally competent creators, is entirely ideated and written for everyday readers, for those social groups among which discrimination is not only fomented but also prospers. This is an important, unprecedented achievement for us, given the last fifty years of our history. It is also a political phenomenon, a sign that democratic breezes are blowing in the country, whether the government likes it or not: they are decontaminating the leaden, totalitarian atmosphere. Given this last detail, we should explore the reason *IDENTIDADES* has been so popularly received by folks throughout Cuba, from east to west. The journal's pages are like a shout out about the

democracy that is coming and has begun to show signs of its impending arrival. And this, despite its lack of clarity, or its delay, due to all forms of tricks or ruses. It is clear that these signs could not be more obvious in the context of this journal. It reveals something very basic to us, but that we have not spent sufficient time considering over many decades: that proposing to efficiently fight against different forms of discrimination without first having eliminated ideological prejudices and political structures that are themselves discriminatory is not possible or even serious. Despite any information to the contrary, the Cuban people hardly read periodicals of any sort. On the one hand, they have the "news" dailies, which have said the same thing, in the same way, forever. Commenting that they have become a substitute for toilet paper is quite common, and dubiously tasteful. However, the fact still remains that the vulgarity of this reality does not stem from the affirmation itself, or what it



describes, but the reason this happens. On the other hand, there are specialized or genre-specific magazines and journals that all share a common characteristic, that they fulfill one of Nietzsche's dictums: "They muddy the water, to make it seem deep." For whatever reason, specialized journals and magazines that have circulated here that deal with racial or some other kind of discrimination limit the depth with which they delve into the drama of the discriminated, and the history that weighs upon them. Ideological attempts to avoid the subject and political commitments are truly a yoke they bear, seemingly without repair, from the time they are born. Their movement about intellectual circles, or contact with scholars and such, is equally restricted, but not by premeditated market plans, but rather the deliberate, premeditated, dense nature of any focus on it, and meager opportunities created for a discussion among readers kept out of that rarified space. Even within this context, heartbreaking due to its scantiness, and despairing, due to, perhaps, an insidious, governmental strategy, we have had the great fortune of witnessing the birth of *IDENTIDADES*, whose creators decided to put it to the test, from its very issue, by making it circulate in and around deep Cuba: from Havana's neighborhoods to the country's interior provinces and municipalities. They did this without consulting anyone or waiting for any official permission. In addition, it is also offering the

discussions and debates contained therein at a level with which common, ordinary folk can engage. This is doubly important both because it respects tradition and also takes into account bad social influences, poor education, both scourges that condemn them to be discriminated against and discriminators. Only the first four issues of the journal have been distributed in Cuba, but readers from Holguín, Matanzas, Pinar del Río, Antilla, and Santiago de Cuba, and in Havana neighborhoods like Vedado and Alamar, etc., know the publication equally well. It seems that *IDENTIDADES* is quite successful in reaching and being positively received by our island's readership: it is a readership that has for years been ignored by inaccessible, official publications. The same could be said about "alternative" publications, since they are not able to operate and express themselves independently, free from political mediation or influence, anti-racist and anti-discriminatory ideas. In any event, *IDENTIDADES* is still the first graphic journal of its kind circulating here, a place where there have been none for decades, and serves as a precursor of new times, given the way in which it deals with the discriminatory realities that abound in our culture, economy, social life, and politics. It even deals with such matters in other American countries. For all these reasons and more, it is clear why *IDENTIDADES* has made such an impression on us. Fortunately, everything suggests that it is not the only

thing it is going to leave us, since this is a young and fully effervescent project whose credentials are obviously those of something that has come to stay.

\* Paper presented at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. Published courtesy of *Diario de Cuba*.