

The year 2007 marks the 200th anniversary of the act that abolished the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in the British Empire. This was the first of many steps that put an end to the nearly 400 years of human trafficking that provided the labor force necessary for the kind of slave-labor economy that was established in the Americas and the Caribbean. Of course, the total abolition of slavery, which took until 1886 and 1888, in Cuba and Brazil, respectively, was still a long way off.



For this reason *ISLAS* wanted to join in some way the numerous commemorative acts that are taking place in many locations around the world. Thus, we have devoted space to a number of articles that from very different points of view examine these phenomena, as well as their historical and contemporary repercussions in the three continents that were affected by the slave trade. Many of these works not only spell out for the reader the horrors of the business of slave trafficking, its causes and modalities but invite him or her to consider the philosophical ideas that were used to uphold and justify it. As Dinizulu Gene Tinnie has suggested in his article “200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade,” this is now a moment for reflection about those events whose complex and diverse consequences affect us even today.

In that vein, José Hugo Hernández’s essay “Cuba: Sinister Paradoxes” takes Cuba as its point of departure to explicitly explain how the British decree did not signify the end of the human trafficking or even of slavery. Its promulgation was concomitant with a time when the plantations on the Island were experiencing their greatest and quickest growth, thus causing the Cuban slavocracy, and others elsewhere, to find imaginative ways in which to continue the importation of African labor. The treaty that Great Britain imposed on Spain was thus violated via a very lucrative and illegal slave trade made possible only as the result of collusion between Spanish officials in Cuba and Madrid’s government. The impunity with which this was done became so great that it was during this period that the greatest number ever of Africans in all the Island’s history entered Cuba. It is logical to assume that the greater risks implied by the illegality caused the conditions under which the slaves were transported to become even more unhumane. Consequently, this activity caused an even greater number of victims during the Middle Passage.

Sowande’Mustakeem, for his part, focuses on the lack of agreement between different scholars as to the exact number of Africans captured in Africa, particularly of

those who were brought to the Americas and the Caribbean. He also emphasizes the need to further examine the repercussions of the slave trade, offering a succinct evaluation of the demographic, economic, social and cultural consequences of these events. This focus is of particular importance because it deals with present-day realities, with something real and tangible in every one of the countries where African slavery occurred. In them it is possible to see not only the imprint of slavery but also how African descendants continue to suffer and face multiple problems whose origin is several centuries old. Nevertheless, Mustakeem rightly asserts that this also facilitates the recovery of historical memory, an idea precisely in keeping with the UNESCO-funded project “The Route of the Slave.” This project offers various different ways to examine the issue of slavery –e.g., the slave trade and its horrors– but it also considers the unraveling of the results of forced interaction between Europe, Africa and the Americas of extreme importance. In this context, the racism that today continues to wreak havoc in multiracial countries should be of primary concern.

Much along the same lines, Rebecca Shumway offers an examination of the economic interests at play behind the abolition of the slave trade. She also emphasizes the experiences to which the African continent was subjected since then, as the supplier of the material required by the European colonial powers, and the economic, political and social difficulties that became the slave trade’s legacy in Africa. The section devoted to these events closes with a paper by Christine Ayorinde, who evaluates the commemorative events that are taking place in Great Britain and other countries on account of the 200th anniversary.

In the aforementioned articles, the reader will plainly see that there are diverse elements upon which all the authors coincide. For example, the fact that the abolition of the slave trade and slavery were the result of a long process that was itself preceded by significant abolitionist activity; activity that embraced many different humanistic, religious, ethical and moral criteria. Nevertheless, the definitive blow to slavery came with industrial Europe’s new capitalistic interests.

Similarly, this issue of *ISLAS* contains discussions of a reality that has often been silenced –the role enslaved people themselves had in this process. The resistance they offered from the moment of capture, during the Middle Passage, and then on the plantations where they were confined made them the first abolitionists against New World slavery. It should be recalled that the Haitian Revolution, which occurred a few years before the British act was signed into law, created on the French half of Saint Domingue the very first territory to free itself from this institution. History records innumerable acts of slave resistance as well as of the extreme violence with which it was met. We would like to highlight the resistive acts of Virginian Nat Turner, in 1831, to whom Jorge Camacho devotes a short essay entitled “Nat Turner and *Sab*,” referring in the second case to a character in Cuban Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s anti-slave novel of the same name. Nat Turner’s rebellion was so daring and effective it managed to shake the very foundations of the U.S.’s slave system.

In keeping with our proposed intentions when we first began publishing *ISLAS*, we continue to expand the geographic area covered in the Diasporic studies we include. In this issue we are referring to a historical essay about the African presence in Argentina, by Erika Denise Edwards. In it, she traces for us how Africans and their descendants in Argentina, a country whose predominantly white society imposed on them a discriminatory system, dealt with their situation either by assimilating to European culture or attempting to maintain their African roots and brotherhood. She also often offers interesting comparisons between the situation in Argentina and in Cuba at the same time.

The first article in the section on Art and Literature, by Francisco Morán, offers a recontextualization of the turbulent life of mulatto Cuban poet Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido). His execution in 1844, for his alleged participation in the so-called “Escalera Conspiracy,” reminds us once again of this issue’s main purpose. This is just one more example of the repressive politics with which blacks—not just slaves, but also “free men of color” in Cuba—were still being victimized nearly forty years after the British decree. In this same section, Jorge Núñez takes a fresh look at the early career of Afro-Cuban Chinese painter Wildredo Lam, the son of a Chinese man and black woman. Núñez discusses the influence surrealism had on Lam and his own contribution to this movement via an analysis of the illustrations he did for André Breton’s fantastic story *Fata Morgana*.

Finally, but no less important, we have the papers devoted to racism in Cuba today —“The Invisible Color,” by Juan González Febles and “Racism in Black and White, by Víctor M. Domínguez. Both offer new testimonies on the lack of representation of blacks in Cuban social sectors, including in the media, which additionally continues to propagate a stereotypical and negative image of blacks.

Thus, we would like to reflect a bit here. With this eighth issue of *ISLAS* we are now at the journal’s second anniversary. We are pleased to have met our original goals, and are especially delighted with the increased participation of black Cuban writers and journalists. It is also very valuable to us that the journal has been received positively by those who have managed to have access to it in Cuba, as this issue’s “Letters to the Editor” demonstrates. It is now the case that the analyses we have carried out regarding the journal’s future lead us to exhort our collaborators, wherever they are, to focus their writing not only on the description of contemporary and real manifestations of racism, no matter how regrettable they are, but also on how these problems are being and should be dealt with. Those who are still suffering the consequences of racist ideologies and practices should be the ones planning out whatever peaceful means and solutions should be adopted not just for the present and the short term but also for the future. Given Víctor M. Domínguez’s assertion that “in terms of racial equality” Cubans are entering “the twenty-first century with more much more suffering than glory,” we ask ourselves what can be done.

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