

A busy and effervescent November 4th, 2008 election night saw the anticipated victory of Barack Obama in the contest for the presidency of the United States become a reality. This confirmed the predictions and expectations of not only a large part of the U.S. population but also of many men and women around the planet who expect from him substantial changes that could very well impact their respective countries. There were worldwide celebrations and Cuba was no exception. The fact that the President is black and, additionally, the descendant of an African man, has had an enormous impact on the island.

This issue of *ISLAS* includes an article that offers us a synthesized view of how the news of Obama's electoral victory was received by diverse sectors of the Cuban population. These reactions, in great measure, reflect the way in which these groups deal with the problem of racism. "Obama's Perception in Cuba" shows us how reactions in Cuba ranged from silence, political subtlety, and opportunistic hypocrisy (particularly amongst those closest to the top), to jubilant enthusiasm among the most marginalized popular sectors of the population. For the author, himself, the popular celebrations took on an apothecotic nature, which is, in fact, an enormous blow to the rhetoric the government has for so long issued on the subject of racism.



It is true that the problem of racism is evermore gaining attention among various social groups around the country, particularly because discriminatory practices have increased over the past two decades. Papers have been published and groups created in the midst of all this now uncontrollable ebullience: they publicly propose a need to deal with this problem. It seems, nonetheless, that these efforts continue to take place under officialdom's shrouded shadow, which traps them in a dead-end street.

In their respective articles, Juan Antonio Madrazo and Leonardo Calvo endeavor to shed light on the veiled path upon which many of the promoters of these efforts tread. They focus their attention on the "Color Cubano" project, sponsored by the National Union of Writers and Artists in Cuba (UNEAC). It seems these two writers smash to smithereens what has all along been presented as a serious effort to openly and publicly deal with the question of racism. They argue that the attempted claim of the UNEAC members in presenting themselves as genuine representatives of the black population, their needs and desires, and to bring about political and cultural actions in an effort to confront the problem, do not stray far beyond the comfortable space of their sponsoring institution. This may have served to once again present to the outside world an image of good intentions

that has often managed to catch the attention many who observe Cuban reality with unbelievable naïveté. The rhetoric employed by these individuals constantly repeats trite expressions that instead of contributing to the problem's solution increasingly hide it and blame others for being responsible and for their shortcomings.

Such circumstances make of the recently created Citizens Committee for Racial Integration an immediate necessity that could no longer be put off. As the documents we include in this issue state, this Committee proposes to promote “the fullest integration of all citizens to all social, economic, cultural and institutional spaces, concomitant with the social composition and cultural underpinnings of the Cuban nation—regardless of race or skin color.” The appearance of this Committee on the current scene, where these problems are manifest, not only offers a message of hope for many Cubans but is also a new incentive for *ISLAS* in its attempt to contribute to a broad and objective discussion of the topic.

Other articles offer our readers a wide perspective on the race problems that still exist in varied spheres of Cuban life, ranging in topic from the police harassment to which the black population is subjected, to the perniciously racist way in which courts hand down justice in Cuba, and even to a testimony about life in Cuban prisons by one of Cuba's most persistent champions for civil rights: Jorge Luis García Pérez “Antúnez.” On this occasion, “Antúnez” offers us a detailed description of the torture and mistreatment to which he was subjected after escaping from prison while attempting to see his dying mother. For her part, Dr. Darsi Ferrer of *Cubabarómetro*, to whom *ISLAS* extends its welcome, presents us statistical tables and commentary that summarize how the Cuban population perceives the race problem in its own country.

I cannot end this note without mentioning that November 9th, 2008, issued a very moving bit of news for the world—the death in an Italian city of the emblematic South African singer Miriam Makeba. She was a warrior against apartheid in her homeland and the bearer of a constant, inspiring, and hopeful message for anyone who fought against racism and for civil rights. This issue of *ISLAS* joins all the many homages that have been offered up for this singer who knew how to express with singular versatility a desire for freedom, people's struggles and suffering, and whose songs have been hummed all around the world. Jorge Núñez's unusual obituary offers us a moving reenactment of the last living moments of this artist whose international renown will not disappear with her own physical death. The illustration on the inside cover of this issue was specially created for our journal by Cuban painter Alejandro Aguilera.

Juan Antonio Alvarado Ramos
Editor-in-Chief