

The International Year for African Descendants has concluded, but the independent Cuban movement took full and impactful advantage of it. In addition to efforts to strengthen and make more effective this kind of work in Havana, where most of these organizations are headquartered, gains were made in the growth and reinforcement of work of this sort done throughout Cuba's other provinces. Ties with them were nurtured.

All these efforts were crowned by the success of the second "Cubanness: Past, Present and Future" Forum (November 24-26, 2011), convened under the auspices



of the *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration* (CIR) with support from other civic organizations engaged in our struggle towards the same goal: the *Citizens' Observatory Against Discrimination*, *Independent Writers Club*, *Nuevo País* project, *Agramontist Current of Independent Attorneys*, *Juan Gualberto Gómez Integration Movement*, *Cuban National Liberal Party* [PNLC], *Foundation for Freedom of*

*Expression*, *Cubabarómetro*, and *OMNI ZONA FRANCA*.

Among this forum's most important achievements was the participation *en masse* of leaders and activists, and other invitees to the event's opening, which took place at CIR headquarters. Days before the forum, the political police had already begun to warn and threaten the event. Unable to accept the idea of a gathering that offered proof of the growing mobilizing ability of its organizers, they appeared on the scene, on the second day, surrounded the meeting's location, and prevented participants from entering. Resistance was met with arrest and many were arrested.

The only person allowed to enter was Juan de Dios Mosquera, the leader of the *National Cimarrón Movement* in Colombia. His presence was of great importance not only because he could understand the importance of the work his hosts were doing, and was aware of the many problems the black Cuban population is facing, but also because he witnessed first-hand the constant harassment of all those who no longer just accept the worn-out, official rhetoric on the race problem.

Despite the fact it was impossible for the discussions and debates of November 25<sup>th</sup> to continue, the forum organizers reaffirmed their determination to move forward with their programmed event on Saturday the 26<sup>th</sup>, and so they did, this time without harassment, perhaps because of the enormous publicity the prior day's events garnered in the international media.

One of the event's main objectives was to contribute to the undeferrable debate about the future of an inclusive Cuban national project, as well as to specify the challenges to ensuring that black Cubans be able to achieve the status they deserve. With this in mind, participants emphasized a wide variety of historical and contemporary

topics that made clear the preponderant, yet never acknowledged role that black Cubans have had in the economic, political, social and culture construction of the nation, which contrasts with the inequality and racism they have endured since the creation of the republic, in 1902—which is highlighted in this issue of *ISLAS*.

The already endemic nature of this problem in Cuba can be seen clearly in the article by Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas, “Identity and Steadfastness on the Road to Integration.” What it brings to the discussion about this issue is a review of the constant denunciations about it that were offered by intellectuals, politicians, and civic activists since early republican times, based on their perception that “the nation greatly lacked culturally and structurally in being able to see the causes, essence, harm and danger of the racist behavioral patterns upon which our *mestizo* nation’s complicated coexistence was modeled.”

The article goes on to highlight how the issue was passed on to the Castro revolution, and how it has worsened for the past fifty years, due to repeated adaptations considered “necessary” to ensure some coherence in a political rhetoric that turned racial equality into a paradigm. Together, the demagoguery with which the problem has been dealt, and the denial of its existence for so many years, have caused the government to turn a deaf ear to denunciations and warnings, and to ignore those who from the very start of the ‘revolutionary process’ became involved in a real campaign to pursue the right path towards what was being promoted rhetorically.

The article by María I. Faguaga and Juan F. Benemelis focuses their critique on national projects in Latin American countries, and in Cuba, particularly. They review projects—historical and contemporary—regardless the political, ideological orientation of the governments in power at their time, that can be characterized as having included elements of marginalization and exclusion, and of subjugating blacks. They had no rules or practices that acknowledged and respected their rights. On the other hand, people who from the most radical and also the most coherent positions on the country’s reality go to the root of the problem, and also openly challenge domineering and exclusionary practices, are pursued and even arrested in Cuba today. Unfortunately, these encounters take place beyond the white, elite government’s spaces. We must also deal with “African descendants who are disconnected and disinterested in their own, who are not self-aware, or hide this, who are alienated, and fakers and/or manipulators who usually promote the rhetoric that other, white *criollos* tell them to, or that they themselves craft to please them.”

Lamentably, this last scenario is oft repeated in today’s Cuba. Some blacks and *mestizos* much more concerned with the benefits they receive become pawns in the official political game, and allow themselves to be presented as true representatives of their people. They are featured and seen by the Cuban population in the few attempts the controlled media make to allude to this subject. One of their most aberrant tasks, especially in the international arena, is to discredit real representatives of the black Cuban population via ‘shows’ in which they offer lectures, travel, and attend events of all sorts. Such was the case with the meeting “Cuba and African Descendants,” which was held a few months prior to the very contrasting CIR forum, and whose attendees required careful selection by the Cuban government.

The article by Manuel Cuesta Morúa is in a similar vein. He focuses on the Cuban nation and its inchoate nature, which he attributes to founding cultural processes in which Cubans—black and white—played an active and enriching role. Cuesta Morúa accomplishes this by looking at history and the way it has been interpreted, presented, and manipulated. His article attempts at “a conceptual, cultural, and historical level to contribute to the rewriting of our history by using other frameworks.” Other articles along these lines focus on the role played by black Cubans in history, and their relevance, in order to give credence to the current movement there is promoting the rights of blacks and *mestizos*, and a reinterpretation of our realities—past, present, and future.

The importance given to cultural expression within the current civil rights movement in Cuba, and its social repercussions, is featured in the work of collaborators like Víctor Domínguez, who reviews Cuban literary works about black life on the island from the colonial period to the present moment. Jorge Olivera reveals the essential role expressions and codes originating in our varied African background had in the birth, development, and dissemination of Cuban music, and highlights the work and legacy of some of this tradition’s greatest contributors. Juan Antonio Madrazo explores the way in which artistic expression in the visual arts, film, and theater has helped us visualize the presence of blacks in the Cuban nation and its culture.

All this historico-cultural analysis, and the necessary controversy it must generate, comes together in “Two Sides of the Same Coin are at Play,” an article about the unsettling book by ‘official’ historian Roland Rodríguez, *La conspiración de los iguales* [A Conspiracy of Equals] (2011). This is true particularly when one considers all the manipulation and intentional lack of information there is about our history. *La conspiración* offers a confused and doubtful evaluation of the Independent Party of Color (PIC) and its leaders. By way of contrast, the very same article talks about filmmaker Gloria Rolando’s documentary, “1912: Voices of Silence,” which was presented just a few hours earlier at the forum. It differs dramatically with the aforementioned book, and takes an object look at that century-old event that has caused so much speculation, and does so by using many, varied sources of information.

The presentation by Juan de Dios Mosquero was particularly auspicious. He presented the most important details about the *National Cimarrón Movement*’s struggle from its inception in 1982, and details about its accumulated objectives, strategies, and achievements. One of its goals, from the very beginning, was to bring together elements of the fugitive slave movement of yesteryear, and elements of this organization’s goals today, offering it as the only way “to attain the place in society they deserve.” The analysis he offered of his platform and the bases of its struggle revealed intimate ties that unite the Cimarrón Movement with those of blacks in Cuba.

His final words were powerful: “You can count on solidarity from the Cimarrón movement as well as my own, personally. From this moment on, during my first visit to Cuba, and after what has taken place today, it will be my mission to tear down this romantic myth of the eternal Cuban revolution, which I now understand has failed, and is unfeasible after more than half a century. It is as decrepit as Fidel Castro, himself, as the buildings of Havana, as cars in Cuba.”

The current issue also includes Gloria Llopis’s article about a specific case of racism and discrimination, the kind that is now commonplace in Cuba’s social reality, and which needs our attention, as a way to make our theoretical projects a concrete reality for the benefit of the most needy and forgotten. It also contains José Hugo Fernández’s interview of Berta Soler, whose devotion to the cause of democracy in Cuba, tenacity, and bravery are well known by all.

Finally, it is noteworthy and inspiring that this issue of *ISLAS* be published at a time when the United States is celebrating African-American History Month, an important time when the triumphs of African Americans are highlighted, as is what is yet left to be done. With a hopeful view to the future, famous African-American writer and activist Maya Angelou, is hosting an important program about civil rights, has expressed “her hope that there will no longer be a need for African-American History Month in the U.S. to explain the contributions of African-Americans to the United States. . . We want to get to where there will no longer be an African American History Month, a time when black history is so much a part of U.S. history that we study them together. . . That is our hope, and we must keep up our work until this is a reality.”

Dr. Juan Antonio Alvarado Ramos  
Editor-in-Chief