



Second Race and Cubaness Forum. (November, 2011)

Identity and Steadfastness on the Road to Integration

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The second Race and Cubanness Forum: Cuba-Past, Present and Future is already history. The Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration's (CIR) main academic event, with its ample agenda during the International Year for African Descendants, took place in Havana from November 24-26, 2011. It once again showed off the CIR's organizational skill and ability to draw people, and has begun to serve as an automatic reference for other civic organizations in Cuba. Such was the scene at the Forum, characterized by fraternity and the kind of healthy and broad debate one would expect in a civic organization. All this reaffirmed the degree of intellectual excellence displayed by leaders and activists bent on taking a good, long look at the essence and manifestations of our past, present and future coexistence.

As if by custom, the event was marred by harassment and repressive aggression by the Cuban political police. Nevertheless, there were certain things about this second Forum that made it a momentous landmark, a memorable occasion on the road to finding the his-

torical justice and integration Cuba's present and future demand.

Firstly, we should highlight that the event theme, "Two Centuries of Black Thought in Cuba," is evidence of a qualitative leap in the analysis and evaluation of our presence in Cuba's historical and social panorama. The speakers presented black Cubans as protagonists and creators of a political and socio-cultural imaginary and thought that must automatically be part of our structuring as a nation, and not as the elite's victims or objects of plunder, and paternalism.

The inaugural act brought together about fifty people at CIR headquarters. They were members, collaborators, representatives from various other pro-civil society movements, and news correspondents, and all thoroughly enjoyed the cultural program in an openly sharing environment. The program included poetry and hip-hop, as well as the presentation of the 2011 Tolerancia Plus Prize, a distinction by means of which various pro-civil society organizations acknowledge the trajectory and contribution of committed Cuban or foreign people and institutions

that respect difference. The recipients this time were Catholic priest José Conrado Rodríguez, a devoted defender of rights and human dignity; and in the racial category, the deceased Dr. Leyda Oquendo, who devoted her life and talent to promoting equality and Afro-Cuban cultural values.

The presence of Juan de Dios Mosquera was enormously rewarding, too. He is the National Director of the *Movimiento Nacional Cimarrón* [National Cimarrón Movement] in Colombia. This universally known leader spreads charisma, friendliness, affection, and educational, political and intellectual ideas everywhere he goes. His coming to our event with his experience and solidarity, particularly to see first-hand the Cuban reality, and its specificities with regard to our struggle for human rights on the island, revealed his great sensitivity.

Despite the fact that CIR leaders were victims of numerous threats by the political police in the days leading up to the event, and repressive agents organized an operation surrounding the organization's headquarters, it seemed that the rest of the event would come off without a hitch. Nevertheless, on the morning of November 25th, another gigantic operation surrounded the location because the authorities were extremely irritated by the "excessive dimension" of the inaugural event and decided to forcefully impede the academic meeting's continuation. At least, this is what several officers confessed after being questioned. The repressive agents courteously allowed only the Afro-Colombian leader to enter the event, and he was constantly amazed by the fact that other invitees were thrown out, and dozens of activists who did not leave when ordered to were placed under arrest, for a period of hours. International public opinion widely condemned this increased repression,

and the Colombian leader served as witness to the Cuban regime's disdain for fundamental rights.

Repressive agents abstained from acting on Saturday, the 26th, perhaps because of the media attention their assault generated the day before. All the debates and presentations went on without delay or disturbance. The Colombian leader gave a wonderful talk about the fundamentals and experiences that define his movement, which promotes the acknowledgment of Africans and their descendants, and their contributions to history and culture in his country and the rest of the continent. It also promotes African descendants receiving the rights and social spaces they deserve. Juan de Dios Mosquera also reiterated his committed solidarity and support of the struggle for the democratization of Cuba.

Also discussed and debated were Dr. Carlos Moore's ideas about the origin and conceptual essence of racism as an instrument of domination, the effect and reach of current anti-racist thought (despite changes in our country's ideological rhetoric and pretensions), the depth and reach of the intellectual and political contributions of figures of African descent that have been victimized by official neglect, the socio-economic proposals in the Independent Party of Color's program (1908-1912), and participation by black Cubans in the Republic's political life.

A number of participants intervened frequently with interesting comments and questions about current and future challenges for situating the issue of black Cuban history and rights where they belong, smack at the center of the complicated conditions a society in full crisis, and headed for traumatic and far-reaching changes, faces. The repressive interruption on the 25th forced a postponement of presentations on socio-cultural topics, and a



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few received from abroad, but the participants came to a consensus about various proposals and criteria that were set as subjects of joint work in the immediate future.

After many months of preparation, the CIR came out of this second Forum visibly fortified, both in its internal cohesion and its intellectual quality. It garnered international acclaim and prestige with its moral authority in facing the intolerant arrogance of the Cuban authorities, who seem incapable of realizing the degree to which their old-fashioned, repressive designs are futile in confronting so solidly, organically and programmatically

organized an institution made up of people whose commitment to the building of a Cuba modeled on justice, diversity and pluralism goes beyond the sporadic and unconvincing actions of a government so powerful and yet incapable of remaining calm when dealing with a peaceful meeting of some forty people.

For the CIR, the eventful but successful celebration of the second Race and Cubanness Forum constituted the beginning of a new cycle full of challenges and ambitious plans involving the organizations members and collaborators, all of whom are certain they can be successful in meeting them.