

# Two Sides of the Same Coin are at Play

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Only a few short hours gave some extraordinary witnesses a chance to see just how complicated the debate over the real history of Cuba, and just what the miscegenated, diverse country's interracial relations are like.

October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011, was officially declared the “day of national culture,” in commemoration of that very same date, in 1868, when a war-like marching hymn—written in the second person—was turned into the national anthem by the country's heroic, native sons from Oriente. On precisely that day, the headquarters of the Hermanos Saíz Association (AHS), an organization that brings together creative young people who at least say they are faithful to the regime, hosted a book presentation for *La conspiración de los iguales* [The Conspiracy of Equals], by historian Rolando Rodríguez. In it, he offers a very specific and polemic view of the Independent Party of Color (1908-1912).

Mr. Rolando Rodríguez, a bureaucrat at the Council of Ministers, is sort of an official historian, and is able to gain access to the most remote and elusive archives in the world. Yet, his take on those founders and leaders of

the independence war who showed themselves to be against the ostensible disdain of the Republic's politically dominant class towards the rights and dignity of Cuba's African descendants is less than edifying or complimentary.

Several of the nation's important political and cultural figures were present at this event. Dr. Esteban Morales, a prestigious academic who only recently joined the debate about the race issue, as he serves the government's interests, shared a series of opinions and critiques that have generated a great deal of unrest amongst intellectuals in Cuba who are concerned about the island's race problem. It is very audacious and problematic indeed to mention things like the near lack of racism there was in the independence war's, rural battlefields, the arrival of racism to Cuba with the U.S. interveners in 1898, the alleged annexationist ideals of the Independent Party of Color's leadership, and a positive opinion of fratricidal Cuban president José Miguel Gómez (1909-1913).

It is noteworthy that in this exceedingly and poorly written book, the author considers the Independents of Color's potentially violent alternative impertinent and unneces-

sary. He does so with total hostility, despite the fact all the events prior to the party's existence, and those afterwards show very clearly the few chances of success its members would have had if they had chosen to continue only their peaceful, political opposition. This stance starkly contrasts with the terrorist violence those who today govern imposed back in the 1950s, when conditions were propitious for them to have promoted non-violent, socio-economic and civic change, instead.

Outrageous are the disdain and omissions of this author, as is the fact that he was chosen to present the Independent Party of Color's political and social agenda, because in truth this party was highly patriotic, progressive and inclusive. Any objective, well thought out analysis of it would dismantle the book's main arguments. After this poorest of presentations, the AHS's president ordered those present to purchase the book, which shock and bothered the participants because they were given no opportunity to ask questions or make comments.

The jury is still out on whether or not this was just one more example of the government's exclusionary hegemony, or a desperate measure on its part meant to prevent the barrage of criticisms and worthwhile questions those few dozen people there surely could have launched. Perhaps it was a combination of both those things. A young, indignant, female intellectual who was visibly moved by all this was not able to resist the temptation of reading the questions she brought with her in the hallway.

The publication of a book that was clearly sponsored by the country's highest leadership at a time when we are about to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the massacre of the Independents of Color, under express orders by General José Miguel Gómez, whose

statue on a central Havana thoroughfare, and is the only pre-Revolutionary symbol restored by the Cuban government, constitutes a confirmation of just how institutionalized Cuba's current reality is darkened by racism.

Facts such as these, and this behavior, leave no doubt that the dominant elite doesn't want dark-skinned heroes. Also worrisome is the attitude that was assumed by those who are supposed to be the youthful *avant-garde* of Cuba's intellectuals (AHS), who showed themselves to be as conservative and retrograde as their aging role models.

This book's publication has served as a considerable lesson for us, and has also mobilized us. There can no longer be any doubts about how those *criollo* supremacists who rule over us think and feel. This irritating text has caused a number of intellectuals already quite aware of the current and future dangers of ill treatment on account of the race problem to decide to go public with their concerns and worries outside of their family circles, and amongst their friends.

Fewer than 24 hours after this horrible presentation, more than two hundred of us got together at the Manuel Galich room at the Casa de las Américas to see an intensely moving documentary, "1912: Las voces del silencio" [1912: Voices of Silence], by renowned filmmaker Gloria Rolando. Despite the notable absence of the 'luminaries' who were present at the event the day before, those of us who *were* there enjoyed the way the subject was treated in such an informational and aesthetic film, with its masterful and objective use of real sources. Outstanding in it were interventions by a considerable group of historians, most of them black Cubans, who provided important facts and judgments to help viewers better understand a histori-

cal moment that has so often been elided and manipulated.

The documentary shows original, period documents and journalistic materials. This filmmaker's valor and honesty had a huge impact. She makes quite clear the participation in the massacre of then Colonel José Francisco Martí Zayas-Bazán, son of Cuba's independence apostle (José Martí), and also criticizes the presence of the aforementioned statue of José Miguel Gómez.

This documentary is illuminating and moving. Its excellent use of images and tremendous selection and utilization of music communicates the information and touches the emotions and, on this occasion, there was plenty of time for questions and comments from the public. That afternoon's presenter, Robert Zurbano, Director of the Casa de las Américas publishing office, spoke about the importance of materials like this at a time when we are seeking objective evaluations of our history. He also pointed out the importance of objective perspectives on thoroughly transcendent events that have been manipulated and twisted by "books as recently as two days ago."

Those present who spoke thanked the filmmaker for her dedication and sensitivity, and reaffirmed the importance of and need

for disseminating the historical truth in public spaces when and wherever possible. Various emotional comments offered critical evaluations of Rolando Rodríguez's book. Those who made them expressed their generalized rejection of its subjective and unedifying treatment of our history, its facts and protagonists.

Dr. Esteban Morales, the previous day's presenter, and an intellectual who goes around the world—with government's sponsorship—on a mission to manipulate those who still allow themselves to be confounded by Cuban reality, arrived just in time to see how many black Cubans who are rooted in their values and self-esteem know we are stronger than the racism that disdains us.

When it is time for the bicentennial of the failed Aponte Conspiracy, which early on tried to eradicate the shameful scourge of slavery from our land; when it has been a hundred years since the treachery and crime that victimized the Independents of Color, Cubans who are committed to the historical truth and full integration with justice should be aware of the fact we are facing a power as intolerant as it is racist. Yet, we should also be decided that this time we will not succumb to provocations or allow ourselves to be divided.