

# Cimarrons of Their Own Accord

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*Georgina Herrera, Gloria Rolando y María Magdalena Campos Pons*

Intellectual cimarrons Georgina Herrera, Gloria Rolando and María Magdalena Campos Pons are part of a legion of Afro-Feminist women who have taken on the job of dismantling the history of invisibilizing of which black women have had to endure the worst part. Invisibilization linked with a process of colonization and historical coloniality. In each of their stories, they serve as an echo of those anonymous women at the margins of history whose identities have been massacred.

## I

Of her own right, Georgina Herrera Cárdenas (*Jovellanos*, Matanzas, 1936) has won an undeniable space in Cuban literature. She is like a fish in water in her radio work, and the *Radio Progreso* station, itself, is half of her life. Yet, she

is also an extremely talented wordsmith in the fields of Cuban poetry and narrative.

Madame Georgina, or Yoya, as she is known by many, is one of those women who seduces you at first sight, from the intimacy of her words, and with artful conversation. She has never stopped looking to her real and imaginary Mother Africa: characters like Fermina Lucumí, Mariana Grajales, Penélope, Eva and the Angolan queen Anna Nzinga all form part of her feminist agenda.

Poetry is at the center of her world. She has authored important texts that are coveted today by the most prestigious of literary circles in the Caribbean, Africa and United States. Examples of these are the poetry collections *GH* (1962), *Gentes y cosas* (1974) and *Gustadas sensaciones* (1996).

Georgina Herrera—just like Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé—is a Ceiba writer, a legitimate daughter of a tradition that for centuries has revealed the rebelliousness and spirit of black women. Defending noble causes is an option in her life and work. For her, literature has the power to alert people about things that are harmful and should be avoided. She defines literature as a compass that allows her to find the truth.

Her emancipatory poetry offers us her intimacy and allows us to witness her fears, passions and sorrows. A book as intimate as *Golpeando la memoria* reveals to us her open veins. Poet Nancy Morejón has baptized Yoya the queen of transparent verse; essayist and critic Robert Zurbano sees her as one of the humblest and most unprotected voices in Cuban poetry, a woman illuminated by the fire of her verse. Her texts articulate various spaces in which past and present are joined.

## II

Cuban cinema is still short on women among its filmmakers. Sara Gómez was the first of them to approach the margins with a pluralistic view, and Gloria Rolando is her successor.

Gloria Victoria Rolando Casamayo (Havana, 1953), who has a degree in art history, is a filmmaker, researcher, producer and scriptwriter. Of her filmmaking work, what stands out is her work as assistant director and collaborator with documentarians such as Santiago Álvarez, Rogelio París, Bernabé Hernández, Enrique Colina and Santiago Villafuerte. She worked with Pastor Vega on the fictional film *Habanera*, and Manuel Herrera, on *No hay sábado sin sol*. This was her starting point for her later work as a highly regarded filmmaker.

She is currently one of Cuba's most active documentary filmmakers; her actions and

work are anchored in the traditions and life stories of Cuba's black communities. Her relationship with the Caribbean universe is special and vast, particularly with the Anglophone Caribbean and Afro-American communities. She is a woman who seeks her truth and finds her reasons to be supremely transparent. She has managed to create a beautiful rainbow of the Caribbean through her images.

Her documentary work foregrounds the importance of black cultures not only in Cuban society, but also in our particular Diasporas. She has taken the voice of African descendants to important universities in Washington, Boston, Atlanta, New Orleans, New York and other places, and gained in them recognition she has not received in Cuba. The absence of her mention in voluminous critical volumes about Cuban film and documentaries is notable and unjustifiable, above all in the shadow of the publishing arm of the ICAIC and Oriente publishing houses. With her particular perspective, she has discovered other ways of thinking about Cuba, has shown us our other family and, stimulated, through her poetic vision, a healthy tendency to question everything. Each and every one of her films poses new questions not only for history, but also for the present. Her educational and sharply focused films allow us to engage in a critical exercise. They nip at the silence and deconstruct the blinders created by nationalist racism. In each one of her films, she is rigorous, and reveals how racism is still a battleground in Cuban society.

Her enormous love for Cuba and her people of African descent is obvious. She is seduced by the feeling of being trapped by the dangerous limits of her emotion, and possesses a remarkable interpretative honesty. Her Antillean consciousness is absolutely indestructible. She has the enormous capacity

to see film differently, through each and every one of the life stories, as seen through her lens. She broaches community issues in documentaries like *Oggún: El eterno presente* (1991) and *Los Marqueses de Atarés* (2002).

In 2010, after six year of solitary research, she presented the first part of her film trilogy devoted to the history of the Independent Party of Color (PIC): *1912: Voces para el silencio*. This series has become a source for those who want to learn much more about the struggle for independence and the emancipation of black subjects in Cuba. Her pedagogical and emancipating art contributes to focusing on the substance of history, and research is her most powerful tool. Her production company, *Imágenes del Caribe*, is an independent concern that destabilizes knowledge's official spaces, puts new cartographies out there, and legitimates the socially themed documentary film with an educational purpose. Documentaries as a kind of social engineering and discursive outlet gaze back at silenced reality. Her documentary work leaves censors speechless, and contributes to narrating a version of the nation that includes our other half.

Gloria Rolando is a first-person protagonist in her documentary work. Her participant-observer films have become a real background for discovering our Caribbean universe, historical memory's wounds, social inequalities, and ethnic identities. She believes in the ability of images to translate conflicts.

*1912: Voces para el silencio* is a beautiful lesson with an enviable elegance that is marked by its purity, tenderness and emotion. From the edge of her gaze, Gloria Rolando warns us of obvious dangers like racism and discrimination. She appeals to the past to bring us closer to the present; she touches upon some of the key elements that negatively mark contemporary Cuba's situation.

### III

My last focus today is on María Magdalena Campos Pons (Matanzas, 1959), an excellent artist. She first studied music, and then visual arts. She did theater and was seduced by that artistic experience. She is part of a very energetic generation, the generation of Cuban plastic artists of the 1980s known as the *Renacimiento Cubano* [Cuban Renaissance], which reunited creators Marta María Pérez and Consuelo Castañeda, among others. It was a generation that sought to see much more than ours has been able to.

Campos Pons is one of the first of her generation in Cuba to approach the diasporic experience and African culture. She has been exploring these, and processes of social exclusion like racial and gender discrimination, for more than three decades.

When no one else was doing it, she began looking at power relations through the lens of raciality, beginning to talk about race and racism via plastic arts. She witnessed the racism that still marks us while she was working on her degree. This woman from Matanzas now lives in the United States, and is also able to visualize the still open wounds of slavery. Just like Gertrudis Rivalta, she weaves a part of Cuban history, the part that is invisible, and particularly the history of black women, who have always been offended and humiliated.

María Magdalena's body has been an exact map for finding the route of displaced Africans. Her body and skin have allowed us to visualize the scarification caused by prejudices. They are spaces in which identity contest one another. Her corporal identity has served to reveal the identifying marks of many black women. It traces one complete line that joins past, present and future. For her, the best way to understand the future is to know the past.

Her opus is thought in constant motion, a primary terrain for resisting discrimination and prejudices. Hers is an entire poetics of resistance, questioning power relations, the visibilized hegemony that tries to deconstruct narratives of raciality.

She is also no stranger to exiles and Diasporas. For her, the road to exile is long; they are roads that hurt, for which reason she attempts to trace trails of freedom and negotiate the distances between Boston, her place of residence, and Matanzas, her birthplace. She is one of those women who has begun to trace a road of return, from a position of intellectual honesty. She is a woman who is no longer frightened by the rattle of chains, but she does worry about the lashes that the social body continues to receive.

#### IV

Georgina, Gloria and María Magdalena are part of a legion of Afro-Cuban women who have been able to release the bow's tension and shout out loud about all the injustices. They have dared to ideate a female imaginary from a position of blackness, just like Excilia Saldaña, Leyda Oquendo, Inés María Martiatu Terry, Guillermina Ramos Cruz, Odette Casamayor Cisneros, Sandra Álvarez (*Negra Cubana tenía que ser*), Julia Mirabal, Oilda Hevia, Yesenia Selier Crespo, Sandra del Valle Casals, Irene Esther Ruiz, María Elena Fagua-ga Iglesias, Fátima de la Caridad Patterson, Yohanna Depestre Corcho, Las Krudas and many others. All of them weave stories, delve into silenced issues, and don't allow anyone to keep them from seeing the dark side of the moon.

They are women who prefer difference; they denounce the officious task of exclusion. They are always alert and ready to strike a

vengeful blow to machista and discriminatory thinking. They have dared to narrate the nation from a black, feminist imaginary, and give voice to anonymous women. They have looked out at a complex Cuba using a grammar of difference; they rattle mirrors of violence and cross their limits. They do not allow their stories to remain anchored to the margins: they always manage to break through the locks. They seal and open the cracks. Their characters are part of a still silenced history marked by the nation's cries and spiritual rupture. They are part of an insistent necessity because they tell stories of pain, but also of resistance and survival. They are cimarrons who are not afraid to dream. Each one of their words and gazes are acts of freedom.

#### Additional reading:

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