

The year 2013 began with many, new challenges for the Afro-Cuban Alliance, Inc. and the *ISLAS* production team. It was necessary to continue our work cooperating with organizations that are promoting civil rights in Cuba, are dedicated to the struggle against racism and all forms of discrimination and, particularly, with those activists who have



become permanent contributors to our publication. This is what makes it possible for us to present to you this first issue of 2013, an issue that greatly informs you about the Afro-Cuban population's current situation and the way their problems are analyzed by people who are actually going through the same situation.

What is new for us at this time is that we decided to go beyond the boundaries of our journal and have organized a series of activities that will highlight for the international arena, and in a manner perhaps never before attempted, the complexity of the entire situation of blacks in Cuba. To begin with, we decided to consolidate work accomplished in 2012 and create a panel presentation with Cuban activists as speakers for the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) international conference, in late May and early June, in Washington, D.C. This proposal became a real-

ity when the panel "Los afrodescendientes en la nación cubana" [African Descendants in the Cuban Nation] was approved. Intellectuals and activists such as Manuel Cuesta Morúa (The political integration of Afro-descendant Communities in South America. Deliverative democracy-toward strong democracies), Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas (Traditional sociocultural references and interracial relations in contemporary Cuba), and Rafel Campoamor (Africas in the Americas: Afro-Cubans as part of the Afro-Latino family) will explore the topic. I will also make an intervention, as the panel's organizer and commentator, and further, we are all members of the *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration* (CIR). Just as the article "The CIR in an Historic Year" states, something unprecedented is going to take place at LASA: we will be analyzing "essential factors in Cuba's race problem today, and presenting the voice of an alternative Cuba at an event that has traditionally reserved a place only for intellectuals representing official Cuba."

This event gives continuity to work started in November 2012 at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) of the Organization of American States (OAS) by activists Rafel Campoamor, Darsi Ferrer and Juan Antonio Alvarado, on behalf of Cuban civil society. The arguments, testimonies and denunciations presented there served to clarify the situation that Cuba's African descendants are currently facing.

But our most ambitious plan, which has been in the works since late 2012, is the celebration of a week titled "Crossing Havana-AfricAméricas" in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It opens with an exhibit of

photos by activist and CIR leader Juan Antonio Madrazo of a number of marginal neighborhoods in Havana, where the situation of Afro-Cubans has become seemingly intolerable. As its catalog explains, in this exhibit one can see an elderly woman bearing on her back the burden of her livelihood; a hovel boasting images of high culture; children blissful despite their innocent misfortune; attempts at accounting and order for marginal prosperity; hygiene triumphing over devastation; melancholy as an identity aesthetic; the unsuspected implosion of the city's most rotted areas; violence that assaults the ghetto; rictus and gaze; as well as a desire to live, even in the midst of impotence and the cursed mark of race, and the audacity of living badly near good, as if poverty were admonishing insolent prosperity; the repression of African descendants by other African descendants at the gates of the forbidden city of the neo-bourgeoisie, and in the heart of a city that belongs to all its citizens.

The cultural identity of the marginalized navigates the destitution in which their dreams end every night. There is a crude aesthetic in *Crossing Havana*, with its photographs of many cities in one. It is a group of images that have slipped through the fingers of those in power in order to culturally document their political obscenity and the obscenity of their policies—and the failure of their urban project.

Yet, this week goes beyond all that. In addition to our photographic exhibit at *Young Men and Women's African Heritage Association* (YMWHA) headquarters, a series of other activities has been planned: interviews, conversations, workshops,

work with children and adolescents from Pittsburgh, film showings and discussions, and cultural events with Afro-Latin flavor. The closing event will be a concert by the *Coro Latinoamericano-Pittsburgh* of African inspired music from all over Latin America, and Afro-Latin dance performances. All this is possible thanks to the joint efforts and participation of numerous institutions and organizations, as one can see on the poster (page 80) at the end of this current issue of *ISLAS*.

Thus, *ISLAS* is still contributing to the enrichment of our knowledge about Afro-Cuban life, as it has since it was founded. On this occasion, we devote the present issue to lauded Cuban musician “Bebo” Valdés (Quivicán, Havana, October 9, 1918-Stockholm, Sweden, March 22nd, 2013), who decided to abandon Cuba due to his disagreement with the political system instituted in 1959. His dream of returning to his birthplace, once a democratic government was established, remained unfulfilled at the time of his death because of the persistence of an unchanging Cuba. A central and paradigmatic figure in Cuban music, with worldwide acclaim and awards, his name shall remain in the memory not only of his compatriots both on and off the island, but also in that of his admirers around the globe. He will always captivate them with his eternal talent as a pianist, jazz musician, arranger and bandleader. Jorge Olivera's article “Musicians for All Times,” written before Valdés's death, completes our tribute to this music great.

Manuel Cuesta Morúa regales us with “Cuba's African Descendants: Poverty by Mandate” as a critique of the treatment traditional historiography has given Cu-

ba's African descendants and their participation in the socio-economic and cultural development of the island: "The view of the Afro-Cubans is constructed only via their subordinated and subjective position—as objects—a perspective that never allows one to see their interaction from their point of view, from within, which is basic to all social dynamics. It only reveals their reactions to environmental situations. This narrow and aerial view does not allow one to discern the creative options and social mimesis that invigorate Afro-Cubans and turn them into their own subjects with a possible history... Thus, the historical narrative becomes subordinated to the designs of the hegemonic elite and makes invisible that part of social reality that does not fit within dominant models...the *criollo* narrative found it convenient to anchor blacks to a pre-modern imaginary, as a premise of its social hegemony."

He adds: "I would also like to say that the mandate of poverty for African descendants is reinforced by a regressive process regarding social and mobility models. Starting in 1959, Cuban society no longer distinguishes between differences created by the social game, but rather according to privileges of access granted in and from the political sector... What is worse now is not the impoverishment, but that African descendants no longer have a place in Cuba as economic subjects, unless some sort of profound structural reform takes place."

Another of the articles herein, "From the Boom of Infamy to the Hall of Fame," by José Hugo Fernández, touches upon something that for decades has caused deep disgust among baseball lovers. It has been announced that a Baseball Hall of Fame is

going to be created without mentioning that said Hall was created 1939, at one of the city's most famous sports facilities: *La Tropical*. It was closed in 1961 as part of dogmatic political policy unfamiliar with many popular traditions. This has been the case since January 1, 1959. As José Hugo writes, without any consideration at all, "people, facts and whole chapters of history were erased from collective memory" with no consideration or reflection at all. This resulted in the "trivialization and historical marginalization of icons who were sources of pride and inspiration," among them a large group of African descendants who had shone in the history of Cuban baseball.

This explains why the author adds that this was "a political blunder perpetrated against all Cubans, but very particularly against blacks, who were responsible for some of the greatest feats in professional baseball before and after the revolution..." He warns us to wait to see what is going to happen after the Hall of Fame announcement: "will this new Cuban Baseball Hall of Fame include people like "El Duque" Hernández and so many other professional stars, a majority of them blacks, who escaped Cuba fleeing from poverty and the Cuban government's exploitation, all for the benefit of the Cuban government? When this Hall is inaugurated, will the Cuban sports authorities have had enough time to return to Cubans blacks and *mes-tizos* all the pride they had stripped from them for decades? Will all the brave examples, willpower and anti-racist strength in facing discrimination that the very same authorities condemned to oblivion, along with their baseball prowess, be put front and center?"

The topic of infancy returns to our pages with Gloria Llopis's article "Waiting for the White Child." It reveals how anchored Cuban institutions are in their mentality, a way of thinking rooted in the inequalities imposed by the color line. This can be seen in certain decisions somewhat alarming for the twenty-first century, a time when racial integration is unstoppable. The article exposes an unjustified practice of denying couples the ability to adopt a child who is not of their same race "for apparently psychological reasons, according to a racist psychology that promotes an obviously harmful judgment." Not only is this practice obsolete, but it also an evil example of how there are those in Cuba who cannot get beyond discriminatory lines of differentiation according to skin color.

In this context of imposed differences, Hildebrando Chaviano proposes in his article "Pride in Being Black" to explain why considering one's self to be black should not be a cause of worry. Instead, it should be a source of pride for the human condition. As famous, African-American musician Louis Armstrong once said to British royalty: "I say it loud; I'm black and I'm proud." This did not prevent him from achieving his greatness as an artist. This attitude has prevailed for a long time among Cuba's African descendants and might be the topic of future articles in *ISLAS*.

Young Eleanor Calvo Martínez, moved by expressions of disdain and racism she witnessed in her hometown, researched the social and institutional presence of black Cubans in Güira de Melena during the republican period. This is how she discovered the "Society of Color," founded in 1899

that in 1924 adopted the name "Freedom Center." Its work and struggle to forge traditions right up until the triumph of the revolution, like that of so many others that were closed, were sentenced to oblivion. This reality, and bit of faith, is what the article "Societies of Color and Social Agency in Güira de Melena, 1899-1960" is all about.

Speaking of "black societies," we have also published an article by Ifá Víctor Betancourt, "Black Societies in Cuba as Educational Platforms: the Lukumi Home School." It reflects on the system of education with deep African roots to which children are exposed from birth. Community religious traditions, legends, proverbs and the accumulated experience of the oldest members of the community are the basis upon which this methodology and its moral canons are constructed.

"The Black Man: Hero, Buffoon and Person in Cuban Colonial Literature," by Alfredo Nicolás Lorenzo, is about the way in which blacks were represented in literature in colonial times, and proposes a point of departure for new studies that can contribute to deconstructing the complexity of African descendants in the Cuban nation. Paradoxically, many of the more traditional studies, while seemingly extemporaneous and out of place, are often seen in our times.

Other articles deal with the participation and legacy of African descendants in the country's economic, social, cultural and religious life, for example, Lucas Garve's "Black Women and the Cuban Nation: Historical and Imaginary Memory." New projects like *Cuba Martiana*, *Nuevo País* and *Otra Cuba*, created to confront the competency of officialdom's monop-

lizing cultural project—the only legally acknowledged one, which has been imposed for more than half a century of “revolution,” are treated in Moisés Leonardo Rodríguez’s “Complementarity of Cuban Civil Society’s Projects.” The final sections of this issue include the sections

“Profiles,” this time devoted to social warrior Yaremis Flores Marín, and “Prisoners of Color,” with its third installment by ex prisoner Guillermo Ordóñez Lizama, “Grievous Abyss III.”

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