

Crossing Havana: Something More Than Just Beyond the Razor Wire

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AFRICAMÉRICAS, an academic and cultural event celebrated in Pittsburgh, PA, between May 6-11, 2013, was a starting point for an 'ambassadorial' entourage from Cuba to engage in an ambitious cultural, political and social agenda in various U.S. cities—an agenda without precedent in the Cuban anti-racist movement.

The weeklong event was sponsored by the Afro-Cuban Alliance and especially the jour-

nal *ISLAS*, the *Coro Latinoamericano-Pittsburgh [COROLA]*, Young Men and Women's African Heritage Association [YMWAHA], and the Latin American Cultural Union [LACU] (the four institutions that invited the Cubans to participate. City of Asylum [COA], Carnegie Mellon University, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh Foundation, Pennsylvania Humanities Council, Sprout Fund, among others, too, made possible the presence



At City of Asylum. Henry Reese (Director), Kenya C. Dworkin, Manuel Cuesta Morúa, Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas, Juan Antonio Alvarado, Juan Antonio Madrazo and Rafel Campoamor



Panel on “Deliberative Democracy.” Carnegie Mellon University. Professor Robert Cavalier on far right

of a delegation from the *Citizens’ Committee for Racial Integration*, a Cuban civil society communicative platform whose primary objective is to fight against racial discrimination in Cuba.

The event was an opportunity to establish horizontal communication between Our America’s diversity (a term employed by Cuban José Martí to describe the America that was not the United States), the Black Atlantic and those of our Diaspora living in the United States. It began with a panel on Deliberative Democracy, the challenges it has faced and progress it has made toward a State of Law in today’s Cuban society. At Carnegie Mellon University, activists Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas (CIR Vice-Coordinator), Manuel Cuesta Morúa (*Nuevo País* project spokesperson), Rafel Campoamor (from the *EmpoderaCuba* NGO), Juan Antonio Madrazo (CIR Coordinator), Dr. Juan Antonio Alvarado Ramos (*ISLAS* Editor-in-Chief) and Dr. Kenya C. Dworkin (CMU professor), accepted the invitation of Professor Robert Cavalier (CMU deliberative democracy specialist) to share with the audience their experiences in their

efforts to return to Cuban citizens the agency and participation that could influence and decide their society’s destiny. Their purpose is for Cuba to leave behind the vicious circle of strong man *caudillismo*, State violence and paternalistic hegemony that had turned citizens into the passive object of the political elite’s pillaging and manipulations for more than fifty years.

In the company of a diverse public, and a journalist and cameraman from Miami’s TV Martí, the panelists also tied the topic to Cuba’s race problem, which after 50 years is still a political conflict. Cuba needs for Afro-descendants to be agents in their own civic and political empowerment, and have their own voice and space in which to promote social equality.

Just a few minutes after the panel’s conclusion, we went on to the opening of the *Crossing Havana: Encounters with the other City* photo exhibit at YMWAHA headquarters (Dr. Eric Asongwed, Director; Ms. Pamela Pennywell, Administrator), where Juan Antonio Madrazo Luna’s lens reveals borders and barely examined boundaries hardly explored

by Cuba's social sciences and the official propaganda machines that depict Cuba's current reality.

Each one of the CIR delegates served as a docent/guide at the gallery for the exhibition's six days, in order to be able to interact with visitors. *Crossing Havana* is a social document that through images visually testifies to the marginal situation still facing so many Afro-descendants in Cuba, as well as how they

continue to be anchored to the social ladder's bottom rung. Dozens of photos also reveal the civic actions of participants in the civil movement for integration and their defense of diversity, the repression visited upon those who openly defend their convictions, and the most shocking enclaves of critical poverty and despair in the Cuban capital. Poverty in Cuba has naturalized inequality and become racially stratified.



Opening of "Crossing Havana" exhibit at the Young Men and Women's African Heritage Association (YMWAHA). Cuban activists and event organizers with Pamela Pennywell and Eric Asongwed, YMWAHA leaders



During the "Crossing Havana" exhibit with Radio Marti



Exhibit visitors

YMWHA headquarters and Carnegie Mellon University also hosted five films during that week, all of them with an Afro-Cuban or Afro-Caribbean social theme—“My Footsteps in Baragua,” “Roots of My Heart” and *Breaking the Silence: 1912*” (all films by Gloria Rolando) and “Suite Habana” (by Fernando Pérez), and “Raíces” (about the Puerto Rican *bomba*).

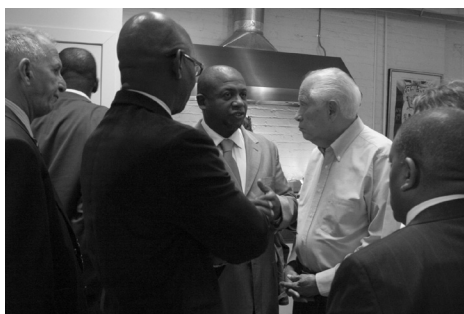
A few days later, City of Asylum hosted the presentation of the most recent issue of

the journal *ISLAS*, during which the activists chatted with a large audience filled with academics, like Drs. Carmelo Mesa Lago and Alejandro de la Fuente, and members of Pittsburgh’s civil society. In addition to this, we met with the local press, with renowned reporter Diana Nelson-Jones of the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, and Silvia Duarte, editor of City of Asylum’s publication *Sampsonia Way*. *ISLAS* leaders and promoters were interviewed on the *Barrio Latino* radio show, at Carnegie Mellon University, by Cindy Fernández, of *La Rumba*, Amparo Alpañes, from Washington & Jefferson College, and by Bonita Penn, of the African-American newspaper *Soul Pitt*.

The end of the week offered two concerts, one involving spoken word and drumming, with a focus on the poetry of Luis Palés Matos and Nicolás Guillén and Afro-Puerto Rican dance, and the poetry of Nicomedes Santa Cruz and Afro-Peruvian *cajón*. AFRI-



Presenting the journal ISLAS at City of Asylum



Cuban activists with Professor Carmelo Mesa Lago

CAMÉRICAS' very last day closed with five workshops (Afro-Latin dance and percussion, Hispanic crafts and language for children, Steel Pan, and human rights in Cuba), and a similarly titled concert of Afro-Latin American choral music, and Afro-Latin and African dance.

Each one of us witnessed the value of solidarity, a practical sense of decency, a respect for diversity in a multicultural city—Pittsburgh—anchored, as it is, in tradition and modernity. We had the opportunity to partici-

pate with professors, community activists and students in a number of workshops meant to make Latin American culture, its music, dance and visual arts visible, all with a desire to contribute to offering a clear and tangible vision of our continent. AFRICAMÉRICAS was an opportunity to create spaces for exchange and reflection, to rethink history through the African Diaspora.

Our journey would take us to Miami and Washington, D.C., where we had the opportunity to get to know many people sensitive to the Cuban problem both in the Diaspora and the island's frontiers. We were received at places and events such as the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies at the University of Miami, *CubaOcho*, Miami Dade College and TV stations *América TV* and *Tele-Miami*. While there, we were able to dialogue from a position of diversity with the Cuban Diaspora. Miami was like an impatient bride who opened her arms to us. In this welcoming city, which is not prejudice-free, we were able



Dance workshop during AfricaAméricas week

to personally tell our stories and reopen the debate on the race problem. In Washington, we attended numerous meetings with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Organization of American States.

This journey gave us the opportunity of meeting with many well-known people, most of them known from afar, like Juan Antonio Alvarado, our Editor-in-Chief, intellectuals such as Kenya C. Dworkin, Iván César Martínez, Armando Añel, Enrique Patterson, Ileana Fuentes, Eusebio Mujal León, Juan Manuel Salvat (with his publishing concern, *Universal*), our brothers at the Social Democratic Coordination in exile, sensitive folks like Lino B. Fernández, Arnoldo Muller, his

wife Daisy and beautiful family, as well as our young friends at the Cuban Soul Foundation, who contributed to visually revealing Cuba's emerging culture, at a new space, Miami's *La Madriguera*. We also met with many of our friends at *TV Martí* and *Radio Martí*.

The other important place we visited was the city of Washington, D.C., where we had our trial by fire, was the XXXIst Latin American Studies Association (LASA) conference. That was where Manuel Cuesta Morúa was able to present "La integración política de las comunidades afrodescendientes en las Américas al Sur. Democracia deliberativa: hacia las democracias fuertes" [The Political Integration of Afro-Descendant Community



Panel on race relations at CUBAOCHO, in Miami



Cuban activists at Miami Dade College

in South America. Deliberative Democracy: Towards Strong Democracies,” in which he dealt with the construction of the nation within a framework of deliberative democracy. He called for a construction of Cuba via a democracy free of identity conflicts. Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas presented “Tradicionales referencias socioculturales y relaciones interraciales en la Cuba actual” [Traditional Sociocultural References and Interracial Relations in Today’s Cuba], about the history of Cuba’s Afro-descendants, and Rafel Campoamor presented “Las Áfricas en las Américas” [The Africas in the Americas], about the relationship of Afro-descendants who live in the Americas with Africans from Africa.

This visit to the United States made it possible for us to exchange ideas with emerging platforms in Miami’s Cuban Diaspora, and come to know ourselves and each other in our diversity, which says a lot about the political scene in Miami is constantly maturing.

As public servants, we have the challenge of finding new ways to construct a new kind of citizenship. This trip leaves us with a wonderful taste in our mouths, one of happiness and solidarity. We are now stronger in facing a weaker rival and are proud of being

Cubans with our own particular identity. We offer thanks to many friends, particularly Drs. Juan Antonio Alvarado Ramos and Kenya C. Dworkin, and other friends and collaborators in Pittsburgh, Miami and Washington. With them, we made possible the impossible. We must do so with those who have not been able to return to or even visit Cuba. We, as goodwill ambassadors have the right to participate in the diversity of our Diaspora. In the meanwhile, new tasks await us in our desire to build a new, post-racial Cuba.



LASA 2013 panel, Washington, D.C.



*Cubans with African-American
civil rights activist Normal Hill*



*Visitors interested in photos at
the "Crossing Havana" exhibit*



*Roundtable at Global Rights.
Washington, D.C.*



*Interview with Cuban activists at the
TeleMiami program "La Diferencia"*