

A much anticipated event took place while we in the midst of finalizing the contents for the present issue of *ISLAS*. For four years, our team has been working with representatives of the anti-racist movement in Cuba. These efforts finally resulted in a very recent conference call between our collaborators in Cuba and us; a call that permitted us to exchange—*viva voce*—multiple perspectives about the work that brings us together. This conference call allowed us to bring together a large group of members and leaders in Cuba—most of them contributors to and readers of *ISLAS*—from the Citizens’ Committee for Racial Integration (CIR), the Juan Gualberto Gómez Movement for Racial Integration, the Progressive Arc, the Cuban Writers Club, and many other social, cultural, and human rights groups. The fact that even a representative from Santiago de Cuba participated in this activity demonstrates the national reach and transcendence of this movement, and the kinds of efforts that are being made to spread it throughout the country.



Those who were present and spoke addressed the principal problems that Cuba’s people of African descent confront; the obstacles and challenges they

face in developing their anti-racist agenda within the island’s incipient but precarious, fragile, civil society. Many were the examples offered of how the white hegemony that still controls Cuba continues to be politically uninterested not only in promoting so anticipated and necessary a debate on the subject, but also in permitting said debate when it originates with independent voices. These are voices it constantly labels as antipatriotic and anti-Cuban, accusations that can bring about serious consequences and reprisals. This strategy has been employed to impose an unacceptable delay on any discussion of the issue, despite an urgent need to at least try to offer alternatives to the fact that there are few if any political, economic, social, cultural, and symbolic spaces open to the island’s black and *mestizo* population.

The fact that people are being asked to be patient on this matter, a reflection of the indifference there is towards it, reminds us of something Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” when questioned concerning his actions, as well as about how much the movement he was leading was growing. In response to the queries, he said: “For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.’”

As the names of some of the organizations present for that conference call clearly imply, the multiracial group that participated made it crystal clear that their struggle does not aim to create or amplify divisions among Cuba’s different racial groups, as some

detractors have tried to allude. Its goal is the total integration of a nation whose formation and development resulted from the active and enriching participation of its truly diverse ethno-racial groups. Respect for diversity and difference within a unified context is an essential and indispensable requirement for all Cubans to be able to move towards the total realization of a country that is biologically and culturally *mestizo*.

Ileana Faguaga, author of one of the articles published herein, expresses precisely this idea: “There needs to be space for their plurality... [to make] space for all kinds of social expressions, even power relations.”

The projects we mention here all exemplify the important educational and cultural work that is needed in this struggle. One of the most outstanding ones is the *Foro Raza y Cubanidad* [The Race and Cubaness Forum], although its work has been delayed due to a lack of funds. Another is the *Jornada Cultural por la Integración Racial* [Cultural Day for Racial Integration], and the recent inauguration of the *Salón de Negros y Negras Ilustres de Cuba* [The Hall of Prominent Black Men and Women].

As Eleanor Calvo points out in her article “A Time for Tribute and Hope,” the *Salón* exists because of the oft reiterated idea that we need to promote knowledge about the life, work, and contributions of a large group of Cubans of African descent. The result of the individual and collective effort of its creators, the *Salón*’s inauguration on August 7, 2009, illustrated once more how projects like this lack support and resources in Cuban society. The exhibit had to be mounted in the personal residence of one of the CIR’s leaders. What is important, though, is that it is there. In its own simple but thorough way, it is offering examples of prominent black independence heroes, professionals, artists, intellectuals, writers, poets, athletes, and even politicians who have fought for workers’ and civil rights throughout our history.

A number of this issue’s authors have addressed an area of Cuba social life in which inequalities are highly visible—housing. In his article titled “Horrors of Yesteryear, Shadow of the Present,” José Hugo Fernández starts off with an analysis of the repercussions currently being caused by the reissuing of Juan Manuel Chailloux’s *Los horrores del solar habanero* [The Horrors of a Havana Tenement Yard]. Fernández uses this discussion to explore the connection between the book’s re-publication and current reality concerning this sort of sub-human housing. As he confirms, one needs no statistics to ascertain that most of the people who inhabit it are black and *mestizo*. One has only to see for one’s self.

In keeping with the tenor of the conversation we had during our conference call, Fernández goes on to highlight some of the features that characterize what he calls the “cold violence” suffered by the black Cuban population, among them the fact that: “... what at the beginning might have been a proper goal has turned against its own objectives. This is further complicated by the fact that if anyone who feels adversely affected by this raises his or her voice to question ‘we are all equal here,’ because the facts seem to contradict this declaration, he or she runs the risk of being considered a dissident, and even a traitor to the anti-discriminatory desires of his or her socio-racial group.”

Lucas Garve also addresses the housing issue in his article, “Blacks and *Mestizos*: An At-Risk Group,” as does Juan Antonio Madrazo, in “The Silenced Equation,” in which he sets “Habana Azul,” a comfortable neighborhood that is free of at-risk people, against “Habana Sur,” the area where these people must live.

For her part, Zeta Dacosta's contribution, "The New Miscegenation," sheds light on a topic that Fernando Ortiz wrote about fifty years ago, the fact that 'Cuba is a melting pot of human elements,' and even more directly on his metaphoric statement that 'Cuba is an *ajiaco*.' Her article discusses how the inclusion of Slavs to this stew, particularly women from the former Soviet Union, has come to add a new ingredient to the mixture that has diversified and broadened our miscegenation. In addition, this article is an invitation to explore further the real cultural implications of not only this so-called "permanent" immigration, but also of periodic immigration and the relationship that was established between the two countries.

In the Art and Literature section, Miguel Cabrera offers us an original look at one of José Martí's written pieces, his principal argument being that there is a connection between *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, and "The Black Doll," a short story by the Cuban poet. As he states: "the topic of race... as regards its function within its structure, and even in the story's development... is not quite significant, but rather is at its very core." According to Cabrera, Martí's story amply recreates characters and passages that are present in Beecher Stowe's novel.

In our effort to follow contemporary reality in U.S. society, we have also included an interview that Ramón Colás did with the Mayor of Philadelphia, Mississippi, James Young, the first African American to attain so high a position in that city.

We are inaugurating two new sections in this issue of *ISLAS*. The first, titled "Counterpoint," is devoted specifically to promoting one of the often mentioned and necessary debates about the problem that concerns us all. The article we've included in this section, "Challenging *Challenges*," by Manuel Cuesta Morúa, offers a critique of Esteban Morales' book *Desafíos de la problemática racial en Cuba*. According to Cuesta Morúa, the book: "is a conceptual provocation that begins by challenging the focus attempted in Morales Domínguez's book on Cuba's race problem." Then he goes on to amply explain the insufficiencies and limitations of the Marxism and theoretical framework that serve as theoretical and conceptual underpinnings for Morales' contentions concerning an analysis, encounter with, and solution of the race problem. This article is also exciting, as its author suggests, because it is the first in a series of works on Morales' book that will be published in subsequent issues of *ISLAS*. The second new section is titled "Parallel Views." In it, we hope to offer our readers general interest articles concerning Cuban culture and society. Inaugurating it is a brief but very suggestive piece by Armando Añel titled "Cuba and the Road to Modernity." It is our hope and desire that these two new sections inspire our authors to enrich a very necessary theoretical discussion along these lines.

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