

ISLAS' intention with this section, "Profiles," is to introduce our readers to the life, work, ideas, and perspectives regarding Cuba today, and to the future of outstanding African descendants on the island. These black men and women are involved in politics, culture, civic activism, and religion.

María Ileana Faguaga Iglesias

Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas
 Historian and political scientist
 Vice-President, *Progressive Arc Party* (PARP)
 National Vice-Coordinator, *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration* (CIR)
 Havana, Cuba

María Ileana Faguaga has become one of our country's most authentic intellectual voices. Her solid training, ample work experience, and recognized seriousness and professionalism at all times have earned her well deserved prestige both inside and outside of Cuba.

This historian, anthropologist, researcher and professor was born in Havana in October 1963. She began to forge her solid career while at university, where yours truly had the opportunity to admire and become friendly with her.

After graduating in 1987 with a degree in contemporary history from the University of Havana, she pursued further studies by seeking certificates, a Master's degree and post-graduate studies in Cuba and Brazil, in important disciplines like ethnology and sociocultural anthropology.

Her already recognized, scholarly production includes research studies, essays and publications on subjects such as interracial re-



María Ileana Faguaga

lations, race and health, gender, Afro-Cuban women, African religions, power relations, and nation and identity. Her work has been published in Cuba, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, the United States, Jamaica, Spain and Italy.

In recent years, she has worked intensely as Director of a program for intercultural and interfaith dialog through CEHILA-CUBA (Commission for Study of the History of the Church in Latin America). As an adjunct professor in the School of Philosophy and History at the University of Havana, she has offered graduate courses such as “Encounters and Clashes of Religious and Secular Worlds,” “The Religious Factor in U.S. Politics,” and “Survey of World Religions.”

Among the many research studies completed by this prolific and devoted scholar of our sociocultural roots and realities are “Relaciones de poder y autoridad entre la Iglesia católico-romana y la santería cubana” [Power Relations and Authority between the Catholic Church and Cuban Santería], “Género, raza y salud” [Gender: Race and Health], “Propuesta metodológica para el estudio de la negritud desde la Cuba del siglo XXI” [Methodological Proposal for the Study of Blackness in Twenty-First Century Cuba], “Raza, poder y nación” [Race, Power and Nation], Afro-Cuban Women and Health Care and “La mujer afro-cubana” [Afro-Cuban Women].

This versatile and indefatigable intellectual has also worked as a journalist, correspondent, columnist and assistant for important media outlets like France Press agency, Brazilian magazine *Mais e Mais*, Miami’s Radio Única, and Mexico’s Radio Monitor. She is also currently one of *ISLAS*’ principal contributors.

Her work and publications are extremely important for the current and future debate about sociocultural relations between differ-

ent groups in Cuban society. Her wellknown intellectual honesty and personal valor make her indispensable for any serious discussion about Cuba’s reality. Graciously, she has offered to share with our readers her ideas, criteria and opinions about subjects that are important to Cuba’s present and future.

Leonardo Calvo Cárdenas: How important do you think it is to preserve historical truth and learn much more about the anthropological keys and facts concerning a society as diverse, plural and complex as our Cuban one?

María Ileana Faguaga Iglesias: History, which is often underappreciated, and thought of and reproduced as if it were just stories, even fantastic ones, is an undeniable reality. As such, it is a science whose object it is to relate, analyze and reflect on the processes and systems of everyday social events, thoughts, customs and beliefs. It is a process in itself that can be subjected to analyses and reflections, and everything within it is important—the macro and the micro, collectivities and individuals. Events are important in and of themselves, but also as symbols. Both communicate, yet it is possible that many symbols considered unchangeable by those who document history are more significant to those collectivities that actually experienced the history, even if, in the majority of cases, that history is not included in history books.

This is why history should never contain only landmark events or famous people, but also the daily life and actions of common people. Both contribute to the circumstances that lead to great events, and make possible the creation and appearance of great people who capitalize and make visible great historical events—for good or bad. To deny that basic essence of history and begin to see it almost exclusively as a narrative of great events that highlights only those aspects of

famous people that are considered positive, and ignores their humanness in an attempt to impose upon us a mythified and reified version of history and its actors even now is harmful to the history of the already biased nation we still are. This is sometimes caused by the sin of omission, and others by a twisting of historical truth, and can also damage the historical narrative we share with the world.

To confront its truths, our truths as a nation, is to position ourselves precisely within its specificity, an internal reproduction no longer part of colonization, but rather of colonialism. In recent years, the government of the Castro Ruz brothers, which has discursively pretended to be the most nationalist of all, has come to be recognized as being a leadership of “Galicians born in Cuba” [white Spaniards born in Cuba, or criollos]. For example, if we were to focus on all the destruction they have wrought in their obvious intention to deculturate us and folklorize the best and most vivid elements of our Afro-Cuban roots, it would be difficult to doubt their condition as white colonialists who govern—which should mean ‘serve society’—have also subjected the nation to their whims and arbitrariness, and interrupted and impeded in its natural progress. This has bogged us down with having to bring to fruition an integrative process that despite more than a century and even now has not been truly realized.

To turn to our historical realities is to return to the violent and arbitrary origins of our original conformation, to go back to pluralism, and the dichotomous pair—tolerance and intolerance. These have been basic and spreadable concepts in Cuba since its ethnogenesis. Nevertheless, these have been considered by those who are in leadership now as one and the same thing (plurality and tolerance). It is as if they were at once prejudicial

characteristics of their sickly national project, which is marginalizing and exclusionary, totalitarian and authoritarian, and also other characteristics (like violence and intolerance) have been used by those very same leaders to construct the framework of their power.

Seeing ourselves in our ethnogenetic diversity and its myriad pluralistic consequences (racial, cultural, ideological, sexual, gender), and our violent origins, that is, in those undeniable historical truths is the only thing that will allow us to follow a path to a reconstitution and strengthening of our damaged social fabric. It is one of the ways that will allow us to reconstruct and heal our imaginaries and our wounds as a social body, a body that has been deeply wounded by having been taught to make an ill-fated, impractical and fictional association between homeland or country, system of government, political ideology and those who govern.

Our accelerated process of de-nationalization needs acknowledge and be strengthened by our pluralism, in all its manifestations, and not for the purpose of an economic restructuring, as is often rumored, perhaps upon the insistence of those in power.

Doomed in the midst of social chaos and ungovernability—either by means that are visible ever more coercive and repressive—we find ourselves being a people with our own historical truths. With those truths as a point of departure, we are starting down a road to legal and distributive equity, real equality of opportunities, with the possibility of making them effective. This should be part and parcel of any attempt to reconstruct the nation, any initiation of a different political plan, any attempt to create a new social contract. If not, it will be difficult for these attempts to acquire the required legitimacy of all social, cultural, racial, political, sexual, or generational

groups among us. For all these groups to harmoniously develop, we need to learn to live as a pluralistic society, which forces us to create legislation against violence through negotiation and consensus building.

LCC: What do you think historiography practically or totally lacks for the purpose of confronting the enormous challenge of defining what we are as a nation with objective clarity?

MIFI: I have already mentioned some of its shortcomings, with relation to historical truth, but I could mention others as important as those, and talk about how they relate to each other. Many of us agree that the historiography produced in Cuba is plagued by silences and omissions, arbitrariness and awful, politically motivated interpretations. We are sometimes tricked into believing that those characteristics are part of our history, yet that is not always the case. In any event, these characteristics—these excerpts, views, interpretations and reflections in black and white—are part of a historiography that is published in a country where independent publishing is a subversive's dream. Yes, and what a dream! What a wonderful and admirable way to show one's disobedience as an unyielding rebel! This is voicing our opposition to the atrocities of those in power, and their manipulations. After all, they permeate everything, even spaces where knowledge is constructed and deconstructed. We should not forget that if there is anything the Castro Ruz brothers do well, it is to fully understand what the old saying says, that 'knowledge is power.' Consequently, they have taken to limiting our access to knowledge by censoring and twisting it on us. This explains why a society that has a very high percentage of graduates from secondary and tertiary institutions has such a high rate of functional and instructional illiteracy.

Nonetheless, even now there is tremendous ignorance about the importance of religion in our shaping as a nation. We also continue to ignore the true role that the clergy in our broad religious spectrum have had in the strength of our social fabric. Those in power have imposed an atheizing policy on all of society, as if everyone had joined the Cuban Communist Party (PCC). Many scholars have taken to declaring the Cuban people to be atheistic and anticlerical; the Roman Catholic Church as counterrevolutionary (in its entirety, with no consideration for either the composition of the clergy nor their worshippers); and continue viewing practitioners of African religions as criminals or people predisposed to be criminal (which is a purely colonialist, anti-black, positivistic and above all, anti-scientific view).

However, it is precisely this lack of knowledge about the profundity of each religious and spiritual elements present on the island that allows the government to choose or designate the Roman Catholic hierarchy to serve as a spokesman of sorts, a decision that is arbitrary and discriminatory. We cannot lose from sight that the Catholic Church in Cuba, while not unaware of the country's cultural depth and breadth, still lacks the kind of recognition and significance it has in other Latin American and European countries. It also lacks social authority and impactful relevance for the island's African-originated religions, particularly Regla de Ocha or Santería. Aside from this grave shortcoming, which influences its ability to be truly objective (as it says it is), and is absolutely necessary in the social sciences and historiography in Cuba, I agree with Afro-Cuban historians Juan F. Benemelis and Iván César Martínez that we need to take a fresh look at the nation's altar, because on it rest people whose actions were truly anti-

nationalistic, such as the first independence supporter and later President José Miguel Gómez, who in 1912 ordered the massacre of more than five thousand black Cubans, and who today even has a recently renovated monument to him on one of Havana's main thoroughfares.

We must revisit our country's history so we can learn the role that each of its ethno-racial groups has played and, consequently, give them their well-earned place in history, and similarly give them equal opportunities in daily life. The sacrilege of black Cuban women having been excluded from feminism is the result of ignorance, racism, opportunism and politicking hidden behind the guise of supposedly revolutionary historiography. There is not one word about the outstanding role of the black population in education and journalism, or about their drive to obtain an education while facing so many, huge obstacles. There is no mention of the black lodges, which still exist in eastern Cuba. Hardly anything is said about the role played by migrants to Cuba from the rest of the Caribbean, or about the Cuban population that engaged in a reverse migration. It is shameful that we are barraged by the imposed idea that the Cuban population barely did anything for itself before the Castro Ruz brothers took power. The same can be said about ignoring the civil society that existed before them, or the more or less authentic attempts there are to revitalize them at the present moment. Hidden from us is the fundamental role that unions played, or an accurate evaluation of the Popular Socialist Party (PSP). At one point, it got to the extreme of trying to deny the mutual cultural influence between the people of the United States and Cuba, and the fact that we know anything about the Cuban historiography that is produced or published abroad is practi-

cally due to chance, even when the authors are Cubans who live in Cuba. The zones of silence and the distortions continue even today. There are many archives that are closed to researchers. We are ignorant about much of the past, but we also don't know about most of the daily events that would allow us to analyze the present or, retrospectively link them with the past without the usual distortion that occurs.

LCC: Despite the induced atheism of recent decades, the Cuban people continue revealing an intense and diverse religiosity. How do you think that religious hierarchies of any denomination should contribute to Cuba's reconstruction as a modern and balanced society?

MIFI: Humility, moral support, the teaching and practice of rapprochement, listening, the creation of dialogue, education and encouragement to seek consensus and love, so we can rid ourselves of a violence that so permeates relationships between Cuban men and women in Cuba, and facilitate the indispensable and necessary reencounter with those Cubans who live abroad. These could be some of the essential contributions they should make at the right time. These could help define the very nation. These are contributions that all the nations' priests, priestesses, male and female clergy could make to the nation as a whole.

When religions fulfill their function they are spaces of acceptance and love, harmony and spiritual realization. In this way, they contribute to the realization of a being's integrity as a human. This has all been distorted by the Castro government's structure, which has invaded even the privacy of individuals and families.

Cubans—or at least those of us who live on the island—lack training for being able to engage in dialogue. The worst of our traits

as individual and collective subjects have been exacerbated. We are trapped by violence, and also reproduce it. It is hard to listen to someone who does not think exactly as we do, more so yet if they differ in opinion. We have become accustomed to the idea that helping ourselves overcome our material wants is an obligation. Thus, we expect this. Furthermore, we often boldly hurt those who do not help us overcome our myriad problems, because we want more, and believe that we deserve it. Yet, we are not always willing to share with those who have less than we do; this goes for material things, but also our personal time.

This is an area in which priests, priestesses and other clergy of all faiths could help us, as long as they too are filled with the necessary humility; so long as they are tolerant and open to understanding diversity; as long as they don't take differences to be threatening; and, of course, as long as they can survive the temptation to side with those in power, because if they didn't, they'd inevitably be against the population.

For this reason, they should also not fall into the artificial and petulant habit of overvaluing their own religion, because that would automatically mean they undervalued the rest. When some clergy accept that governments concede them special treatment vis-à-vis others, they are positioning themselves in a position of superiority, even if they don't behave that way. In Cuba, where for years Christian denominations used a visa that allowed them to exit and return to Cuba for religious reasons, it has only recently come to pass that representatives of African religions have been able to do the same. When religious figures allow themselves to participate in the government's power structure—on their own initiative and without the permission of their communities—they are not necessarily paving

the way for the respectful treatment of their own religious communities, or others. This has also happened in Cuba, where delegates to the National Assembly with manifestly professional positions as pastors or babalawos have not consulted their respective religious communities.

We need humility, a sense of collectivity and community commitment. It is essential to value individual attitudes regarding everyone, and forget any delirious notions of fame or fortune by dint of personal privileges. The future Cuba will need to learn to live horizontally and symmetrically. This requires us to learn this right now. Undervaluing others does not make us better.

LCC: What does Cuba's current race problem need?

MIFI: If I express myself quickly and totally honestly, as a black, Afro-Cuban woman, that is, if I speak as one who belongs to an ethno-racial and sexual group that resulted from the ethno-biological blending of my ancestors whose traits nature gave me, and from my position of militancy, my radical positioning in view of discrimination and, in this case anti-black discrimination, then I am equally radical and categorical in my position on the race problem in today's Cuba: I totally hate it.

Nevertheless, my instincts as a historically wounded person who is also currently plagued by the same problem should not cause me to embrace hate or resentment. Both lead down a path that is akin to a vicious circle of hostility. As the intelligent and thinking, rational beings we are, we should never allow ourselves to follow it. That would only help racists, by facilitating our annihilation as social subjects, for which reason our response to intensely polarized positions and immovable founding principles has to be moderation, so we can consciously position ourselves, and

sink in our heels with seriousness, responsibility and maturity. Yet, we cannot allow ourselves to be trapped by the ancient and manipulative story that to work on our own behalf as an ethno-racial, African descendant group is to contribute to the nation's division. Until now, we have been used and abused, excluded and manipulated for the benefit of the white power nucleus, be it criollo, be it Cuban, but always white, or considers itself so.

We must open our eyes, have an attentive gaze, and reflect in a way that leads us to the right answer. There are new accusations hanging over our Afro-Cuban activist heads. The nation's media now accuse us of being pro-imperialists. More recently, *Granma*, the official newspaper and organ of the Cuban Communist Party, has threatened to revisit Law 88, known popularly as the Gag Law, according to which almost any Cuban can be imprisoned and lose his property (even if some have little), by being accused of collaborating with a foreign power. Thus, unless Cuba's governmental institutions have approved it, any sort of collaboration with, for example, the Black Civil Rights Movement in the United States, can be (mis)interpreted that way, and thus incriminate us. This is not unlike other measures that have been used against us, like personal or family harassment, short term imprisonment, denial of permission to travel abroad, racialized offenses, denial of a right to publish, and other forms of harassment and mistreatment. Notwithstanding, because of the extremes some of these tactics have reached, it is impossible to remain passive or allegedly comfortable during our long wait. Neither can we remain neutral. It is impossible to remain naively confident that those in power will resolve the profound and explicitly visible, ethno-racial asymmetries that exist at all social edges and levels, or not to blame four

hundred years of a Peninsular colonial system and Republican capitalism—as our leaders do.

When prisons are overflowing with young blacks of both sexes, our youth sell themselves to neocolonial buyers of sex, because the precarious nature of their lives, and the bad example we as previous generations set, who trusted that education and honest work would bring about progress for our families and ourselves, offers them no other option. When professional black women have to prostitute themselves or work as domestics in the homes of whites with much less education than them, and they also have to endure their abuse and accusations; when an anti-black attitude is commonplace, and we are said to be sensitive if we reject or try to respond to them; when our children are discriminated at kindergartens and schools, and they continue to be condemned to live our ever more dilapidated tenement yards or hovels; when even the government accepts that we receive fewer remittances, and we all know that they are essential for survival; when our youth generally find it impossible to gain access to universities, which speaks volumes about the social, economic and political disadvantage we must endure, about our prolonged entrapment in historically constructed stereotypes created for the benefit of the white population, and in detriment to those who should already be seen as their brother, their compatriots, without regard for skin color, culture or physiognomy, 30% of the black people on the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee are nothing more than a decorative element, something that obliges us to keep resisting and, if necessary, go on the offensive.

LCC: What steps and plans should the authorities and citizens take and carry out to potentially and successfully confront the enor-

mous challenges our country faces in the race problem?

MIFI: Even though Afro-Cuban scholars and activists in Cuba (and from that African Diaspora that is still historically denied us) have made explicit suggestions about concrete steps, in this sense, I will accept the challenge of clearly stating my ideas. You may or may not agree with them. I offer them in no particular order, because I believe that many of these actions should take place in a simultaneous and articulated fashion. Above all, we must acknowledge:

- The multi-faceted asymmetry that exists, with its racist, and specifically anti-black foundation.
- The existence and vitality of a racialized and racist sociopolitical structure.
- The ethno-racial plurality of our country, to reject the false idea that we are integrated.
- The race problem being of a deeply political nature.
- The gravity of the asymmetrical, ethno-racial situation.
- The need for blacks and mestizos be the principal actors in the process to eliminate racism, with no tutelage or false paternalism from those who need to be coerced, instead of helping in their growth and maturation.
- The out-migration of Cuban African descendants, the Afro-Cuban Diaspora, Afro-Cuban exiles, made invisible by the unauthentic history we are offered as national history.

The redress and enforcement of legislative measures to protect and defend against subtle and vile, racist violence is the price we must pay. We must disabuse ourselves of the temptation of having “window dressing blacks” that serve the system by just repeating its rhetoric, supporting its illegitimate position. They are acting against the interests of millions of black Cuban men and women

who are the heart and soul of this entire nation, and the true ethno-racial integration.

We need a concrete and legal process of affirmative action, and to promote at all levels—civic, economic, political, cultural and social—citizen empowerment, of all citizens, and particularly of black Cubans and their descendants. We must work to crush cultural and racial stereotypes; restructure our system of the teaching and learning of not only history, but also everything else, because the history of a place as vast as Africa, like the history of all African descendants, cannot be understood if we do not concomitantly work on all levels of education, at all its levels, as complementary systems of knowledge. All of our current institutions have to get involved in this and others should be created for this purpose as well.

An effective combination of everything I have mentioned, and many other efforts, will contribute to a restarted process of reintegration in Cuba, and of African descendants in a natural space, the Black Atlantic. It will represent the beginning of a true process of decolonization, liberation, and post-colonization for people.

LCC: Being black and female in Cuba at any time or under any circumstance has constituted a difficult road to hoe. From your deeply sensitive and committed position regarding this subject, how should Cuban women face the challenge of transcending machista and discriminatory behaviors that so forcefully survive in our society?

MIFI: The subject of the discrimination of black women is getting complicated. On top of sexual discrimination and as an ethno-racial group, you must add, for almost all of us, discrimination that is based on what economically or politically oppressed social group you come from or belong to. If



one is a lesbian, transgender or bisexual, you must add to this list discrimination of these things, and you can add more, for example, on account of where you live, class of workers you belong to, etc. The situation got even worse because of some embarrassing declarations about Cuba's shortcomings made by the current President of the island, Raúl Castro made publicly. I don't recall him ever making direct reference to discrimination against us as black women. The government has not acknowledged this, nor has the Cuban Federation of Women. We black Cuban women, we Afro-Cuban women, whether we are militants or not, must acknowledge ourselves, and our personal and group definitions and personalities. We must ourselves validate these characteristics, our natural beauty, and be free of colonialist impositions.

We can and must raise our level of self-esteem by using positive knowledge, including our history of resistance, challenges and successes, and making visible those responsible for them. We must rescue a history that belongs to and has been hidden from us, or just are not familiar with, to gain strength. We must become conscious of the fact that we are good for a great deal more than just sex. Proving that is an effective way to break stereotypes. It is our duty to educate adolescent and young black girls about themselves, about not rejecting themselves, at the same time we educate young and adolescent black boys about acknowledging their own worth, and that of their sisters.

We must urgently acknowledge and learn about all the kinds of discrimination to which we are subjected: racial, cultural, sexual, gen-



der, economic, social (neighborhood or professional) and aesthetic. We need more clarity about the fact that this all comes from white men and women, as well as from black men, and ourselves. They and we are victims of a racialized power structure that is now more than five centuries old. It has never been deconstructed. We must decolonize ourselves. This means having an identity, negation and freeing ourselves from an ideology of miscegenation and racial betterment based on discriminatory attitudes we still have amongst ourselves about skin tone, and length and type of hair. We must beat out any temptation to have a man, whatever the price, even if he beats and discriminates against us, or we have to support him. We must learn to love our children but not allow that love and its expression be shaped by phenotypes, hair, and the amount of melanin in someone's skin. We must learn to gregariously share, helping

each other, instead of denigrating and hindering each other, by which we serve our white friends. Mistrust of ourselves and amongst ourselves has caused us to accept a racialized, hierarchical structure that is today still imposed on us. It is a weapon used against us that helps those who discriminate, marginalize and exclude us.

We are facing the challenge of acknowledging our diversity, our plurality of genders, ideologies, instruction, spaces and religions. We must work together with our differences, making them enriching to us, and not allow them to feed the many separations that work against us all. We face the challenge of coming together, respecting and helping each other to make visible black lesbians, bisexuals or transsexuals, who are discriminated not only for their condition as women. Black women are expected to always be available for sex with men. Consequently, these women are hurt even more than their heterosexual black women. Yet, they tend to be rejected by their own cultural and racial sisters. We face the challenge of making our ethno-racial differences count in issues of health care, too. Since we are the worst off, economically, domestic violence, alcoholism, drug addiction, and other social and health ills, are prevalent amongst us. They subject us to levels of negative stress that impact our health and make even more difficult our material conditions of our survival. Yet, we don't even take this into consideration, generally.

We must position ourselves as social subjects, and being to create our own organizations. Those that have existed for these 52 years have never taken our differences into consideration. We need to stop our atomization, so that we can get the weapons that will force the legal system to consider us, with our differences, without it diminishing us. We

need for black women to be represented in the power structure by black women who are conscious of what they are, and with the determination to act in favor and not against their kind, as has been the case till now.

We must fight to make ourselves seen as we are and as we want to be represented by the media, and not how others decide to project our image. This includes the representation of stable black families, all kinds of black social actors, via positive models, and not just through negative characterizations (which are so often induced), as is so often the case. We must articulate our national Afro-Feminism,

research its historic roots, write its history, and search out our Afro-Caribbean, African-American, and African sisters who in the past 52 years have organized and kept Afro-Feminism current. This is all something we are kept uninformed about and isolated from.

To conclude, we must recognize that we have a lot to learn, both theoretically and practically, and that part of that learning involves research, empowerment and citizen reempowerment. We must accept that as black women our struggle for justice is political, but that doesn't mean that they, or we, are anti-national in nature.