

# On the Black Press in Cuba: A Historical Review

Lucas Garve  
Journalist

Ignorance in Cuba about the black presence in the press prior to 1959 is almost absolute. This is another aspect of the lives of black and mestizo communities that has been obscured by racist tendencies that have openly and surreptitiously manipulated the country's memory of its socio-cultural life. Thus, I will affirm here that there was a black press in Cuba.

It is scandalous that a national figure like Juan Gualberto Gómez has been manipulated to the extent that only his political work is highlighted. The importance of his labor in the social life of black and mestizo communities in Cuba and in a decisive manner, in the development of important newspapers belonging to black and mestizo organizations, is eclipsed.

According to Oilda Hevia Lanier, in her book titled *El Directorio Central de las sociedades negras en Cuba, 1886-1894* (Editorial Nuevos Pinos, 1996), "freedom of the press, one of the privileges conceded by

the colonial government, affected the black sector with sizeable impact."

Publications committed to Emilio Calleja's colonial government were among the first and foremost to appear. The author above names *El Ciudadano* and *El Hijo del Pueblo*, both founded by Manuel Albuquerque; *La Unión*, directed by Casimiro Bernabeu; and Rodolfo Hernández de Trava's *El Heraldo* and *La Lealtad*, as the most outstanding. But an oppositional current arose with even greater force, "to unite the black race, promote social education and fraternity."

The leading newspapers in this vein, which had clearly separatist tendencies, were *La Fraternidad* (1879 and 1890) and *La Igualdad* (1892), founded and directed by Juan Gualberto Gómez. These efforts were so important that they successfully united all the black societies of the Island and led the battle against those black newspapers that defended [politically] fundamentalist ideas.

Martín Morúa Delgado, another outstanding figure from the latter part of the nineteenth century, is another personage who is still awaiting an objective historical evaluation. His work as a journalist and publisher was intended to “contribute to the disappearance of the press favoring Spain, because it was damaging to the black race’s desire for freedom and progress.” *El Pueblo*, his newspaper, garnered total prohibition by the colonial authorities. Notwithstanding, Morúa Delgado systematically revealed his ideas through other publications like *Habana Elegante*, and in articles devoted to such topics such as introducing the concepts of Catholic socialism.

Rafael Serra Montalvo was another important person in Cuban print journalism. He was the creator of the biweekly publication *La Armonía*, in Matanzas, whose motto, “fraternity,” served as a mantra for bringing together all races and social classes.

There is another example of equal importance, which reveals the heights that black and mestizo publications achieved on the Island—the women’s magazine *Minerva* (1888-1889, first period). This biweekly publication, directed paradoxically by a man, Miguel Gualba, served as the mouthpiece for the demands of black women. The broad spectrum of topics it touched upon included everything from the need for education to dance. In addition, the magazine set forth ideas that encouraged black women to instruct themselves in order to achieve social emancipation. It also included articles and commentaries about fashion, poetry, home health and hygiene, etc.

The prevalence of the subject of educating women in general and specific women’s publications after the 1880s undoubtedly reflects the creation of a pro feminist discourse that addressed the collective and individual need to communicate progress to the feminine sector. It was the imperative of a modernity that would lead to the very early development of a consumer society in Cuba.

Between 1879 and 1899, there were thirty-four publications created and targeted to serve the interests of black and mestizo communities. Later, in the first four decades of the Republic, the number decreased considerably.

Notwithstanding, columns and whole pages on black issues systematically appeared on the pages of important dailies of differing political persuasions. Some of the outstanding writers that contributed to them were Gustavo Urrutia, Lino D’Ou, Nicolás Guillén and Salvador García Agüero.

It is important to clarify that early on all of these publications promoted the idea of equality and fraternity. They then went on to promote national independence, dealing with social problems, without ever abandoning the notion of the need to educate and cultivate one’s self in the name of social and professional progress. Although this now may seem paradoxical, many of these publications rejected the most direct African religious and cultural traditions while clamoring for a kind of Cubanness and authentic Cuban character that would guarantee devotion to the struggle for national freedom.