

# A Commitment to Equality and Justice

Eleanor Calvo Martínez

Director, *Citizens' Observatory Against Discrimination*  
Havana, Cuba

The anti-racist and pro-integration movement in Cuba started in 1912 while facing enormous challenges and obligations. This year marks the two hundredth anniversary of the first, great anti-slavery and anti-colonial movement, and the hundredth of the *Independent Party of Color's* armed protest and its massacre. This organization burst onto the nascent republic's political scene in 1908, to fight against inequality, injustice and disadvantages—some of which still persist.

These anniversaries are being commemorated in the midst of a very complex, socio-political reality. The profound, general crisis regarding our political model and structural changes the government is implementing, so it can hold on to its power, are further exacerbating and increasing the historic underdevelopment and marginalization suffered by black Cubans.

The Cuban government is a contemporary expression of supremacist hegemony disguised as populist rhetoric. It is conscious of the responsibilities it has shunned, and growing unrest in society. It has created a climate of terror for intellectuals supposedly committed to the struggle against racism; it has been able to limit or demobilize them with obvious intrigue, by employing pressure and blackmail.

At this very important time, there are a number of signs that are serving to reaffirm

the racist nature of the Cuban authorities. Two centuries after the conspiracy led by José Antonio Aponte, Cuban students graduate from all educational levels not knowing the magnitude and impact of that movement. The long awaited monument of this founding father continues to be an unfulfilled promise. In contrast, political and cultural authorities ignore the demands of citizens, intellectuals and artists who are requesting the taking down of the recently restored and reinstalled statue of Major General José Miguel Gómez who, while serving as president, ordered the massacre of more than 3,000 black Cubans, in 1912. He also publicly ennobled the memory of this genocide's principal author: Colonel José Francisco Martí Zayas-Bazán.\*

In light of this, the *Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration* (CIR), with its commitment to its ideals, and in an effort to fulfill them, has crafted a series of actions and projects destined to change the backward mentality that so negatively impacts our social relations, and promote truth-seeking and historical justice. Both are essential to building the future Cuba, one which embodies the equality and fraternity of which we have dreamt.

The CIR has established a program of commemorations and celebrations linked to dates and events important for the national

and international promotion of the rights and values of African descendants. Every year, on March 21<sup>st</sup>, it will commemorate the *World Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination* that was instituted by the United Nations in remembrance of the massacre that took place on that same day, in 1960, in Sharpsville, South Africa, when police forces shot dead 69 anti-apartheid protestors. Each 7<sup>th</sup> of August, it will mark the founding of the *Independent Party of Color* (PIC) in 1908; that of the CIR, in 2008; and *World Dignity Day for African Descendants*. The CIR's principal academic event, the *Race and Cubaness Forum*, takes place the last week of November, each year. Each and every December 29<sup>th</sup>, the CIR will close the year with a *Diversity and Integration Symposium*, which involves the awarding of the *Tolerancia Plus Prize*.

Last March 22<sup>nd</sup>, the CIR filled a void left by the authorities by gathering about fifty people to have an intense, intellectual and cultural exchange from differing points of view. It announced its 2012 Agenda and published its Call for Participants inviting all Cubans to participate in a basic course titled *El Camino de la Identity* [The Road to Identity], which is intended to provide Cubans with missing knowledge and references about the history and contribution of black Cubans to the nation's formation.

The presenters and participants on the panel titled *Actualidad, retos y perspectivas de las relaciones y el debate racial en Cuba* [Today: Challenges and Perspectives on Relations and the Debate on Race in Cuba] promoted an exchange about an issue of extreme interest to our current social scene, particularly regarding the need to socialize the debate and historical knowledge, and the dangers present in the foreseeable and complicated transition in interracial relations.

The nineteenth issue of the journal *ISLAS* was also presented and distributed at the symposium, as were *Afrocubanas: Historia, pensamientos y prácticas culturales*, compiled by Daisy Rubiera and Inés María Martiatu Terry, and *Diplomacia y Derechos Humanos en Cuba*, by Gabriel Salvia (from the *Centro para la Apertura de América Latina*).

Later, a varied cultural program was offered. It included an homage to poet Marcelino Arozarena, led by Jorge Olivera and Víctor M. Domínguez, the leaders of the *Club de Escritores*. Víctor Domínguez and Lucas Garve also did a reading of the play *Quinquenio Gris*, by playwright Hugo Araña.

Performances by a number of young, hip-hop groups; by soprano Yoslainy Pérez, which was very enthusiastically received; and a truly catchy performance by *Misterios del Vudú*, a group from San Miguel del Padrón that preserves and promotes Haitian culture, served to close the event.

On the morning of May 20<sup>th</sup>, a number of political and civic figures associated with the CIR were arbitrarily arrested when they tried to participate in a commemorative act marking the hundredth anniversary of the PIC's armed protest that had been convoked by the *Cofradía de la Negritud*. The Call for Participation its leaders published was ridiculous, when one considers the importance of what was being commemorated, and its members remained lamentably silent while the authorities' repressive actions unfolded.

On June 27<sup>th</sup>, exactly one hundred years after the assassination of Evaristo Estenoz, the PIC's leader, the CIR organized a symposium to honor the heroes and martyrs of the struggle for equality and against racism. Numerous civic and political activists came together, as well as independent journalists and various kinds of artists. They all reaf-

firmed their commitment to values such as complete liberty, equality and justice, and respect for diversity. After the opening remarks, a proposal was made to commemorate a *Día Nacional de Homenaje a los Héroes y Mártires de la Lucha por la Igualdad y Justicia*, on June 27<sup>th</sup>, every year. There was consensus about the need to rectify the fact that the contribution and agency of blacks and their descendants in the construction of Cuba “were not evident in the the degree to which African descendants had access to the spaces where power and well-being were created, and in the persistent criollo and colonial mindset that always presents black Cubans as inferior.” It was agreed that the commemoration of this day should serve “to render unto those Africans—who chose to die at sea rather than arrive as slaves to an unknown land; those slaves who rose up or fled from captivity to create Cuba’s first, truly free spaces; those thousands of African descendants who gave their sweat and blood to the independence cause; those members of the Abakuá brotherhood that on Novmeber 27<sup>th</sup>, 1871, tried to prevent eight medical students from being unjustly slaughtered—in an act that was neither fratricidal or terroristic, but heroic; all the members of the PIC who initiated the struggle for racial equality and integration in America’s pluricultural republics—the respect they richly deserve.”

The participants immersed themselves in a debate about the attainable, transcendental and still relevant particularities of the PIC’s political proposal at the present time. Many of the shortcomings, traumas and inequalities that motivated the PIC’s struggle a century ago still persist today. Many different opinions about our traumatic social reality, one in which blacks still have the greatest disadvantages, were shared. The event closed with a varied cultural program that featured poetry

and music, from concert music to the most genuine expression of folklore.

The CIR’s plans and actions demonstrate the ability and determination of Cubans committed to equality and justice to face the present and future challenges of a nation that truly needs a change of mindset to successfully achieve the building of a new Cuba, of the prosperous, just and integrated Cuba that those heroes fought for—the very same one racist hegemony refuses to acknowledge.

\* **Editor’s Note:** The troops that take part in the campaign against the rebellious blacks in Oriente were led by Major General José de Jesús Montegudo and second in command, Brigadier Pablo Mendieta Montefur. Other well-known leaders were Colonels Carlos Machado (2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment) and Francisco Paula (Flank Artillery), Lieutenant Colonels Ibrahín Consuegra (Military Leader in Oriente) and Enrique Quiñones (Mountain Artillery), Commander Rosendo Collazo (Machine Guns), Captain Emiliano Amiell (Third Tactician for the Rural Guard) and Lieutenant Arsenio Ortiz. Colonel Martí Zayas Bazán was Army Chief of Staff. He did not participate directly in the 1912 massacre, but he was present at the “monstrous banquet” after the war, in the Parque Central.