

Contributions in Black Studies

A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies

Volume 12 *Ethnicity, Gender, Culture, & Cuba*
(Special Section)

Article 2

1994

Expanding Northamerican and Cuban Dialogues

Joy James

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs>

Recommended Citation

James, Joy (1994) "Expanding Northamerican and Cuban Dialogues," *Contributions in Black Studies*: Vol. 12 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol12/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Afro-American Studies at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contributions in Black Studies by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

EXPANDING NORTHAMERICAN AND CUBAN DIALOGUES

The concept for this volume on "Ethnicity, Gender, Culture and Cuba" originated in discussions at the 1993 NorthAmerican and Cuban Philosophers and Social Scientists Conference, held at the University of Havana. Many of the contributors to this journal were participants in last year's academic Conference; in particular, presentations and debates in that Conference's commission on "Gender, Race, and Class" set the theme for this collection.

Discussions of ethnicity, gender, and culture in Cuba, the only remaining socialist state in the Americas, are "foregrounded" by the economic and political structures shaping the context for social relationships and identities. Cubans staged successful independence movements against colonial Spain in the nineteenth century and U.S. domination in the twentieth century. By the middle of the present century, U.S. intervention had converted the island into a "plantation" for sugar corporations and a Mafia-controlled "playground" for tourists. After the 1959 revolution, which ousted the U.S.-backed government of Fulgencio Batista, the new Cuban government implemented comprehensive health care, free and universal education, social security, and free/subsidized housing. These were remedies for a society in which foreign and local elites prospered while the majority of Cubans, especially those with dark skin, remained impoverished and illiterate.¹ Supported by its trade with the Eastern European Socialist countries, Cuba attained the highest standard of living in Latin America. As that Bloc disintegrated and the national economy collapsed, Cuba entered a "Special Period" marked by scarcities and hardships. For instance, milk previously free to school children up to the age of 14 is now only available to those up to the age of 7; privation is intensified by a U.S. embargo and blockade preventing the flow of trade, medicines, food and technology to Cuban people.² Black or darker-skinned and poor Cubans benefited greatly from the economic and social policies adopted after 1959; now, they are the ones most adversely affected by the economic crises of the "Special Period" and the U.S. embargo.

With references to the modern context, its historical antecedents, and the racialized politics of U.S.-Cuban relations, the journal's first article by Lisa Brock explores nineteenth century U.S. African American views on Cuban struggles against racism and imperialism. Brock's "Back to the Future: African-Americans and Cuba in the Time(s) of Race" raises important issues about contemporary African American and Cuban relations. Her discussions of Miami's (largely White) Cuban residents reflects scholarship concerning African American and Cuban interactions in that city which is currently developing at Florida International University (FIU).³ In contrast to the tense relations between Miami's African-descended and Cuban populations — relations recently exacerbated by anti-Black police brutality, the INS's welcome of Cuban immigrants as "political refugees," and a dispatch of Haitians as "economic refugees" — Brock details historical, progressive alliances between African Americans and Cuban nationals.

Jualynne E. Dodson's essay, "U.S. African American Denominations in Cuba," also uncovers the historical connections between African Americans and Cubans by focusing on religious affiliations dating from the late nineteenth century. Dodson's assessment that religious affairs inform(ed) historical and contemporary Cuban societies is confirmed by the 1991 decision of the 4th Congress of the Communist Party to open its membership to Christians and non-Marxist-Leninists.⁴

The nineteenth century was not only a time of expanding African American and Cuban relations, it also signaled the emergence of the Chinese presence in Cuba. Critiquing historical racism in agricultural production, Evelyn Hu-DeHart's "Chinese Coolie Labor in Cuba in the Nineteenth Century: Free Labor or NeoSlavery" analyzes the status of exploited Chinese workers in Cuba in the previous century. Her historical research enables a broader analysis of slavery and neoslavery in Cuban society and the relations of ethnic groups in plantation labor. In addition, Hu DeHart's work, as well as recent investigations into contemporary Chinese communities by Cuban researchers at the Centro de Antropología in Havana, illuminates the diversity of ethnicity in Cuba.

Exploring historical Cuban writings advocating struggles to end racism and exploitation, Dionisio Poey Baró's essay "'Race' and Anti-Racism in José Martí's 'Mi Raza'" reviews Martí's arguments that national liberation and personal freedom are tied to the development of a unified, egalitarian population. Considered the father of Cuban independence, Martí also maintained that Cuban independence from foreign intervention and colonialism required unity among ethnic groups. Poey Baró affirms that this philosophy of a unified, national identity, rooted in the eradication of racism and "races," has significant influence in Cuban thought.

"Strengthening Nationality: Blacks in Cuba" by Gisela Arandia Covarrubias reviews modern and contemporary writers on "race" in Cuba to discuss the building of national unity. Arandia Covarrubias argues that, rather than transcending or ignoring "race," Cubans should develop national unity by investigating the historic contributions of Black Cubans to revolutionary culture and identity and demystifying the colonial residue of racist sensibilities. This essay's references to Cuban literature on ethnicity and Black Cubans highlights writers who contribute to analyses of "race," skin color, difference, and hierarchy in society.

Detailing the intersections of ethnicity or "race" with sexuality and social status in Cuban popular culture, Yvonne Payne Daniel's "Race, Gender, and Class Embodied in Cuban Dance" explores the history of the popular dance form, rumba. Daniel's discussion of the African origins of rumba, and the roles of machismo, skin color and class in shaping national attitudes towards "Black" dance, provides insight into the politics of culture in contemporary Cuban society.

"Caribbean Contrasts: Gender, Race, and Class in Puerto Rico and Cuba" by Isabel Valiela and Norberto Valdez also reflects upon the intersections of social relations to critique the impact of neocolonialism on social hierarchies and inequalities. Examining life in both societies, the authors contrast the current, domestic problems that Cuban women face in the household dealing with the shortages of the "Special Period" with the conditions of impoverished Puerto Rican women.

How women struggle to cope with the “Special Period” and the effects of the economic crisis on the Cuban family is the focus of María del Carmen Caño Secade’s “Reflections on the Processes of Justice and Social Participation from the Perspective of the Family.” Caño Secade analyzes the need for development in the domestic sector during times of scarcity and economic instability in which the burdens of coping with inadequate supplies of food and domestic goods largely fall upon women who manage households and raise children.

Reviews of recent publications on AfroCuban culture and African American relations with Cuba conclude this section. Jualynne Dodson’s discussion of *AFROCUBA: An Anthology of Cuban Writings on Race, Politics and Culture* praises its exploration of African influences in Cuban culture and the social significance of Black culture and racial identities in Cuban society. Joy James reviews Rosemari Mealy’s *Fidel and Malcolm X*, which details the events surrounding the Harlem meeting between both leaders in 1960.

As we go to press, we are keenly conscious of the effects of the blockade and the ways in which the embargo impeded dialogues with Cuban contributors and the journal’s ability to obtain or review, in a timely manner, new work by Cuban scholars. The blockade renders phone calls from the U.S. virtually impossible and mail an uncertainty. Its effect is to make intellectual exchange exceedingly difficult; specifically for this forum, it has postponed the publication of original scholarship by Cuban researchers and academics such as Digna Castañeda Fuertes’s research on Black slave women in nineteenth century Cuba; Martin C. Chiong Aboy’s work on contemporary Cuban Chinese communities; Pablo Rodríguez Ruiz’s and Ana J. García Lázara Carrazana’s investigations into the social meanings of skin color inside Cuban families and neighborhoods; Margarita Castro Flores’s and Olga Dotres Romay’s exploration into discrimination against women in AfroCuban religions; Ana Julia Garcia Dally’s and Lourdes Serrano Peralta’s work on educational attainment and skin color; and, Clotilde Proveyer’s research on the subordination of women in the Cuban family.

Recognizing the obstacles to obtaining work or discussing essays with authors (travelling to Cuba was a prerequisite for acquiring new scholarship) serves as a reminder of the necessity of expanding intellectual exchanges between NorthAmericans and Cubans, as well as ending the obstructions to information access created by U.S. policies. Cuban intellectuals, particularly those whose ideas inspired this journal issue, provide another reminder: despite the blockade, critical inquiry and literary production remain tenacious, organic links developing between Cuban scholars and their NorthAmerican counterparts.

— Joy James

NOTES

- ¹ According to Cuban economist Alonso Casanova, current Cuban life expectancy is 73.4 years, 96% of the population is literate, and the average educational attainment is 9th grade. (Alonso Casanova, "The Cuban Economy," keynote address to the 6th Conference of North American and Cuban Philosophers and Social Scientists, University of Havana, June 13, 1994.) Also see Carol Brightman, "Cuba on My Mind: Island Against the Stream," *The Nation* (March 7, 1994), 298-301.
- ² For additional information on the U.S. embargo and the debate surrounding Harlem Congressman Charles Rangel's bill (HR 2229) for free trade with Cuba, see *CUBA Update* [New York: The Center for Cuban Studies], 3 (Summer 1994).
The "Special Period" has also led to important political-economic developments as Cuba copes with a floundering economy. After the 1992 revision of electoral law, the first post 1959 direct elections to the National Assembly were held in February 1993 (before municipal assemblies elected representatives to the provincial assemblies which in turn elected National Assembly members). The newly seated National Assembly has a majority of first-time delegates and greater representation from youth, Blacks, mestizos, and women. In the economic arena, last year the Cuban government legalized self-employment in over 130 occupations and converted the majority of state farms into smaller agricultural cooperatives. See Brightman; and, Argiris Malapanis and Aaron Ruby, "Cuban Nat'l Assembly debates measures to deal with formidable economic crisis," *The Militant* (April 4, 11, 18, 1994).
In 1993, the dollar was legalized as well for possession by Cubans. Workers earn from 150 pesos a month in the agricultural sector to 600 pesos a month in the professions requiring advanced degrees. On the "black market" the peso exchanges for 100-135 pesos, although the legal rate of exchange is approximately 1 dollar to 1 peso. To obtain greater access to dollars and foreigners, increasing numbers of university professors and professionals, particularly those proficient in English, seek work in Cuba's new economic mainstay, the tourist industry which caters to Europeans and Canadians. With little representation in tourism's workforce, as well as few family members in North America to send dollars (most Cubans who fled the revolutionary society were White), Black Cubans have the least access to dollars. They consequently have difficulty in obtaining commodities available in the well-stocked "dollar stores," which supplement the limited food supplies provided by the universal ration-card system.
- ³ See Roberto Rodriguez, "FIU Professors Seek Answers to Complex Black/Cuban Relations," *Black Issues in Higher Education* (February 25, 1993), 16-17.
- ⁴ Cuban Christianity often coexists in a syncretic form with the "popular religiosity" of African-based religions. For example, Havana's Ebenezer Baptist Church stands adjacent to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center in which ceremonies of traditional orisha dances and songs are performed by local youth maintaining their cultural (and religious) practices. Historical and contemporary Cuban religion is influenced by Santería (Yoruba) and Palo Monte (Congo). In the 1993 Conference commission on "Gender, Race, and Class," social scientists noted the growth in "popular religiosity" concerning traditional African religions, attributing this, and the increasing public practice of religion in general, to the Fourth Congress's acknowledgement of the need for greater understanding people's needs and desires to practice their religions.