

## Introductory Remarks

**Tanya L. Saunders**

I am really excited about how this special issue has come together, with so many voices, clearly in conversation with each other, though each individual contributor may not have realized it when they submitted their essays. What is also interesting is that my impulse to reach out to scholars about a call for a special issue about being Afro-descendant in a Post-Embargo Cuba occurred just before the moment that US/Cuba relations began to officially and rapidly thaw. I had been thinking about sending a call for a special issue on this topic for a few years; it became clear to me, and to many others, that something was about to happen when Raul and Obama shook hands at Nelson Mandela's funeral. That small act is a classic symbolic gesture in any country's foreign policy. Who you shake hands with says a lot.

The *Black Diaspora Review* seemed to be an ideal forum for this special issue. The responses to the call reflected the mission of the journal: "The review will provide a forum for the scholarly critiques; debate every aspect of Black diaspora studies, including its mission, curricula, ideology and/or scholarly methodologies, linkages to other academic disciplines links to extra-academic communities, and its future." The papers that were selected for this special issue were essays that were, unbeknownst to the authors, in conversation with each other, the special issue theme, and the mission of this journal. The selected essays offer a broad look at the issues facing the African diaspora in Cuba, in this profound moment of transition that began with the intensification of Cuba's economic liberalization several years before Raúl Castro came to

power in 2006, and points to the areas that researchers should engage when thinking about Blackness, Black, mestizx, diasporic, and/or any sort of “Afro” identity politics in Cuba.

The special issue begins with reflections from Cuban psychologist and world-renowned blogger Sandra Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez (*Negra Cubana*).<sup>1</sup> Her essay is a cautious and suspicious approach to thinking about the possibilities offered by the process of dismantling the blockade. This caution is, dare I say, an outright suspicion of both the investments and intentions of the United States as well as the Cuban state. She starts her essay by referring to a 2013 *New York Times* article written by Black Cuban scholar Roberto Zurbano.

Zurbano’s essay was ground breaking in that it was one of the first publications in a major news source that pointedly addressed the racialized limitations of Cuba’s economic policies and directly questions what the future holds for Black Cubans in a rapidly liberalizing context, where the history of race and the effects of White supremacy on the Island have gone unaddressed for nearly 50 years. This cost Roberto Zurbano his professional status in Cuba. Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez asks the question, why would Zurbano publish such a critique in the newspaper of the enemy? Another perspective on this question could be, have things risen to such a critical point for Black Cubans in this profound transition back to capitalism that a well respected Cuban scholar felt the need to take his chances with the enemy for these issues to be seriously addressed at home? This is such a profound question and highlights the urgency with which these issues must be addressed and the fact that so many Black Cubans, including scholars who are themselves revolutionary subjects, are sounding the alarm. Abd’Allah-Álvarez Ramírez poses a series of polemic questions that frame much of the discussions that occur in this special issue. She ends with a nod to the significant intervention that Odette Cassamayor-Cisnero makes to this particular debate.

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<sup>1</sup> [negracubanateniaqueser.com](http://negracubanateniaqueser.com)

Odette Casamayor-Cisnero, in her essay “Blackness, Cubanness, and the End of an Era,” offers a perspective that is rooted in a material analysis of the contemporary situation of Afro-descendant Cubans and offers points of consideration, from an economic perspective, of the issues and the concerns that should be considered as a part of this profound transition. Casamayor-Cisneros argues that the liberalization of the Cuban economy highlights one key contradiction: that state attempts to eliminate racial identity in the public sphere did not eliminate racial thinking in the private sphere. As a result, within the liberalization of the economy, material life began to once again reflect “privately held beliefs.” The justification for eliminating differences in identity was, the Cuban state argued, central in maintaining unity in the face of an enemy—the United States. Casamayor-Cisnero asks, and once the imperative of preserving a solid national cohesion against the “enemy” vanishes, what would keep Black Cubans from expressing their own racial concerns, presenting their own agenda, and rethinking the nation in their own terms? She argues for the importance of revisiting a Black identity politics as a means to challenge the reemergence of material-based racial inequality, which is sure to accelerate with the reestablishment of economic relations between Cuba and the United States.

Maya Berry’s essay “‘Salvándose’ in Contemporary Havana: Rumba’s Paradox for Black Identity Politics” follows Casamayor-Cisnero’s and is an important methodological and empirical intervention into thinking about sites of Black identity formation in Cuba. Berry shows how Black artistic and religious expressivity are central locations where Black identity formation and praxis take place. She argues that these are also the areas that are often overlooked in the analysis of politics, particularly Black identity politics, in Cuba. Through comparing the folklorization of Black religious cultural traditions to the “New Afro-Cuban movement,” which sees such practices as playing into the State’s commodification of Cuban Blackness and tends to

take a more material-based approach to racial equality, Berry shows how the traditional division between cultural expression and material-based activist practices prevent the recognition of the ways in which artists and religious practitioners are actively engaged in Black subject formation, and liberation.

Yesenia Fernandez Selier continues the conversation of the importance of religious practice in Black identity formation, extending it in two important areas: through theorizing the importance of performance and memory in understanding Black identity formation in Cuba. Additionally, Fernandez Selier brings in an important discussion of gender identity. Through a reflection on her play, *The Women Orishas*, Fernandez Selier challenges the idea of the Black body as a source of entertainment and shows how performance itself is central in knowledge production and functions as a store of history, of memory. She does this while producing a Black feminist text.

The next essay, entitled “To Be A Black Woman, A Lesbian, and an Afro-Feminist in Cuba Today,” by the Cuban psychologist Norma R. Guillard Limonta ties together multiple axes of power that are central to the formation of Black Cuban identity: race, gender, sexuality, class, and location. This essay, like the others, is a very layered and nuanced text. First, Guillard Limonta begins by situating feminism within Western modernity and makes a very subtle and important move; she includes Cuban feminism within a longer history of Western feminism. The key here is *Western* feminism, not *Western European* feminism. As the essay unfolds, Guillard Limonta invokes a word that has become popular in Cuba among Cuban Afro-descendant feminists, Afro-feminism. This is likely the work of a new generation of Cuban Black and Black queer feminists who have been developing their own Black feminist discourse and have actively read the debates happening outside of Cuba, such as the work of the blogger Spectra

(*spectraspeaks.com*). Nonetheless, the text is one in which Guillard Limonta locates (Cuban) Afro-feminism within a larger hemispheric context in which she includes the work of “Afro-feminists” such as Audre Lorde (US/English-speaking Caribbean), Ochy Curiel (Dominican Republic), bell hooks and Alice Walker (US), and Sueli Carneiro (Brazil). Guillard Limonta’s essay addresses the question of non-normative sexuality and the contemporary issues that Black women and Black lesbians and other non-normative subjects have to contend with in contemporary Cuba. She ends the essay by noting that Afro-feminism has existed before European feminism arrived to Cuba. Guillard Limonta offers us insight into another important aspect of Black Cuban life, one that oftentimes people do not want to recognize much less hear, the voices of women, lesbians, and, finally, Black Cuban lesbians.

The final contribution is a photo essay from the Cuban photographer Sahily Borrero Marín. This submission was one that I did not expect, but at the same time it was right-on. Thinking about and theorizing Blackness, Afro-descendant-ness in a Post-Embargo Cuba is going to require a multi-methodological approach, one that includes intellectual production that occurs through media that is not understood to be sites of legitimate intellectual production within the West (as several of the authors noted). Borrero Marín’s work is an opportunity to include such a format in an academic journal centered on the Black diaspora. The photos are from her series *Mujeres de mi tierra* [*Women from My Land/Country*] in which she focuses on the lives and experiences of Black women. This photo essay is a small selection from the over 100 photos that Borrero Marín has collected over the last 14 years. The selected photos focus on work, religion, and leisure. The images and the expressions of the people in the photos reflect some of the tensions, complexities, and moments of happiness in a difficult and rapidly changing context.

I expect that this special edition will be one of many that will address this issue of Afro-descendant-ness/studies in a Post-Embargo Cuba. I certainly hope it will not be the only one that will take a truly intersectional approach to theorizing, representing, and then critiquing said representations of Cuban life in this new profound moment of change.