
Reviewed by Al Campbell⁠¹

‘Something old, something new.’

This reviewer has written in this journal (*IJCS*) on two of the previous yearly editions of *Cuban Studies* (*CS*) since its three-year interregnum early in the decade. Issue 43 from 2015 was reviewed in the *IJCS* 7(2) (Winter 2015), pp. 265–269, and issue 45 from 2017 was reviewed in *IJCS* 10(1) (Spring 2018), pp 114–118. This examination maintains the same general view of *CS* as was expressed in both those earlier reviews.

The ‘old aspect’ that characterises this number 48 in the *Cuban Studies* series is straightforward and simple: the continued quality, and interesting nature, of its articles.

There are at least six ‘new aspects’ (the lengthier description ‘aspects of the structure of this issue different from the standard *CS* structure’ would be more precise, but clearly unacceptably awkward to use repeatedly) that give this issue a significantly different ‘feel’ from other recent issues of *CS*.

The first thing that strikes a reader immediately is that, contrary to its standard bilingual structure, all thirty-seven entries are in Spanish. This is the result of the source of the entries and hence the source of this issue, which also explains several the other new aspects that will be indicated.

The second new aspect of this issue of *CS* is that, as opposed to the usual procedure of selecting from proposed papers each of which is written on whatever topic on Cuba they happen to be written on, the entries for this issue came out of a specific conference on a specific theme. ‘El Movimiento Afrocubano: Activismo e Investigación. Logros y Desafíos’ was held at the Afro-Latin American Research Institute at Harvard on 14 and 15 April 2017. This of course was central to giving this issue, which appropriately refers to itself as a ‘special issue’ of *CS*, a very different feel from a standard issue.

The third new aspect comes directly out of the nature of the source just indicated: it is a theme-based issue, ‘dedicado en su totalidad al vibrante movimiento afrocubano’ as the editor says in the opening sentence of his introductory editorial note. Of course, editors always try when possible to generate as much thematic coherence as they can through various means. For example, as my review of issue 45 noted, part of that issue consisted of different ‘dossiers’, some created

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⁠¹ Al Campbell is Deputy Editor of the *IJCS* and Emeritus Professor of Economics at the University of Utah.
from joint panels presented, some created from interactions among the contributors to that dossier over a period of time before publishing, etc. And the majority of this issue of the International Journal of Cuban Studies under its guest editor Ricardo Torres is focused on the single theme of the Cuban economy. Issue 48 of CS is just a particularly striking example of such a single theme-focus, in that the entire issue came out of a single conference on a single theme.

Also resulting from its source, a fourth new aspect of this issue is that it does not have its usual book review section.

A fifth new aspect is that the publication of this special issue means, because CS also published a standard issue the same year, that CS published two issues in 2019, deviating for this special issue from its long-standing once-a-year schedule.

This reviewer finds the final new aspect of this issue that I will mention particularly noteworthy. CS is primarily an academic journal, open to all issues related to Cuba. Of course, academic articles in the social sciences such as economics, political science or sociology, very often draw material from, and examine debates and even organised activity by, social activists. Further, such writings are often then used in those debates and organised activities, and many times they are even at least partially intentionally written for that purpose (sometimes centrally, sometimes much more peripherally). This is of course true of such academic studies concerning, and social activism in, all countries, but it is particularly true in the case of Cuba because of the well-known particularly sharp, and even acrimonious, differences of opinion, both on the Island and outside it, on what the fundamental nature should be of the new economic-political-social model which is presently being developed.

This conference, and from it the nature of this issue, consciously chose to mix to a much greater extent than in standard academic work, the contributions to the ‘production of knowledge’ of people largely identified and self-identified as ‘activists’, with more standard academic contributions. This immediately implied many changes in the ‘feel’ of the resulting product, such as the extent and nature of the editing process, the breadth of ‘methodologies’ accepted for studying reality, and many others. In the words of the editor:

Esta reunión tomó forma y adquirió contenido en conversaciones e intercambios con múltiples actores involucrados en la producción de conocimientos en temas ligados a la justicia social, desde el activismo y la academia. En ese sentido, se trata de un número especial, que hemos pensado como una fuente primaria de consulta futura, que intenta recoger las experiencias y preocupaciones del movimiento afrodescendiente cubano. Los textos han sido editados, pero hemos intentado respetar las voces individuales de los participantes. (p. 16)
The thirty-seven contributions that constitute this special issue are divided as follows: A first section of three pieces forms an introduction, ‘Introducciones a un tren en movimiento’. The standard editor’s introduction is the third of these. A one-page poem that was written during the event, ‘El Tren: Dúo Obsésion’, follows. The poem was read to everyone there, subsequently set to music, and has become part of the authors’ repertoire. The articles that form the bulk of the issue are presented in six groups. The first, and the only one without a clearly stated focus on activism in its title (other than a small section concerning private businesses run by Black businessmen to be mentioned below), is titled ‘Racismo: Diagnósticos y desafíos’, and includes seven articles. This is followed by four sections on different aspects of activism titled ‘Activismo: Hip hop’, ‘Activismo: Organizaciones e iniciativas’, ‘Activismo: Proyectos culturales’, and ‘Activismo: Plataformas digitales’. These have three, four, nine and two articles, respectively. A short section titled ‘Desde la empresa’ follows, with two interviews with Black businessmen and an article on microcredit, concerned with the interaction of the expanding private sector and racism in Cuba. A final section titled ‘Documents’ has a summary statement by the organisers of the conference on its contents, ‘El movimiento afrodescendiente Cubano: La reunion de Harvard’, and four very short ‘Notas de prensa’, three written for El Nuevo Herald by one of its reporters, and one written for La Razón by a member of CS’s advisory board.

The editor notes two ways in which this collection of contributions to this on-going discussion in Cuba fell short of what the organisers aspired to for it. First, as is so often the case in discussions of social issues and social problems in Cuba, the contributions were extremely Havana-centric, not only concerning where the contributors lived, but more important, concerning the efforts and organisations discussed. It is often very loosely noted that Havana and the rest of the country are almost two different countries in many dimensions. It is not only that the stronger presence of contributions from outside Havana that the organisers had desired would have been very valuable, but beyond that, that the resulting product can really only be considered to be (an important) contribution to the attitudes toward, and organisational activity concerning, racism in Havana, not in Cuba. (Note there is no claim here that things outside Havana might be either very different or very similar to Havana, only that this collection can say very little concerning racism outside Havana.) The second way this collection fell short of what it hoped to do was that it did not involve contributions from the government, which as they note has repeatedly stated that it is concerned with this issue and committed to working to address it. The editor documents at significant length in his short introductory note his position on what the organisers did to reach out to the government to involve it.
Of course, the government’s position as to why they chose not to participate is not given, but the point here is not to either question at all the sincerity of the organisers to involve the government, nor to pass any judgment on why the government chose not to participate (especially in the absence of hearing its position on its behaviour). To the contrary, the point here is only to agree with the editor that this is a weakness of the collection in that there are no voices from an institution that has always been at least one central player in all social changes (or lack of changes) in Cuba.

Having noted these two shortcomings, which were also noted by the editor, that leaves this reviewer, especially considering that no single contribution could possibly begin to comprehensively cover the whole issue in any case, with the view that this collection constitutes a valuable addition to the constantly growing material on the issue of racism in Havana, from the perspective of a broad, but definitely not universal (missing in particular the government) group of Cuban activists and academics engaged in addressing racism in Cuba.