

Cubans Visit Detroit to Share Information on the African Presence and the Cuban Revolution

Two researchers tour city and address public meeting

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Detroit has been a center of interest and support of the Cuban Revolution for many decades where the majority African American population has engaged in various projects to enhance interactions between both geo-political regions.

A four-day visit by **Gisela Arandia Covarrubias** and **Tomas Fernandez Robaina** represented a continuation of a process of cultural exchange. Both individuals are writers and publishers committed to the exposure of the African historical and contemporary presence in Cuba.

Arandia is a researcher associated with the Cuban Union of Artists and Writers. She has traveled extensively in Africa to participate in conferences in Mali and the Republic of South Africa.

Her work has resulted in an appointment as the leader of the Ejecutivo, ARAC (Articulacion Regional Afrodescendiente de America Latina y el Caribe, Capitulo Cubano), known as a civil rights organization inside the socialist country. She was instrumental in the organizing of the Cuba y los pueblos afrodescendientes en America, a significant conference held in 2011.

Visiting the city as well was Fernandez Robaina, who has worked since the early 1960s at la Biblioteca Nacional (Cuban National Library) in Havana. He also teaches courses at the University of Havana. Fernandez has published widely on issues involving people of African descent since 1968.

In 1994, Fernandez published "The Blacks in Cuba, 1902-1958: Notes on the History of the Struggle against Racial Discrimination." The author has traveled many times to the United States and Africa gathering information on the similarities between African people in various parts of the globe.

Both Arandia and Fernandez participated in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Legacy Conference held during early April in Chicago. SNCC, a pioneering and vanguard organization in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, had emphasized the interconnectedness of liberation efforts in the U.S. and Cuba.

During the late 1960s, SNCC leaders such as Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) and Gwen Patton, traveled to Cuba bringing messages of solidarity seeking support for the African American political movement which had become internationalized by 1967. Veteran SNCC organizers have continued this legacy through annual conferences and other work aimed at achieving total freedom.

Highlights of the Detroit Visit

Arriving on April 11, the two guests were met by leaders of the Moratorium NOW! Coalition and the Detroit MLK Committee. Arandia and Fernandez were hosted at the Hush House, a community-based art and cultural museum owned by Charles and Sandra Simmons.

Administrator of Hush House, **Dr. Tiffany D. Caesar**, was responsible for their lodging and early morning meals. Caesar, a recent graduate of Michigan State University, wrote her dissertation as a comparative analysis of African and African American women activists in Detroit and South Africa.

On April 12, members of Moratorium NOW! Coalition took both guests for a tour of the Dr. Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, for many years the largest of such institutions in the U.S. Since the opening of the Washington, D.C. National African American Museum, this new structure is physically larger. However, as a community-oriented institution the Wright Museum remains unmatched.

A walk through exhibit “And Still We Rise” was viewed by Arandia and Fernandez where the African experience from the continent to the city of Detroit is displayed elaborately. The Cuban researchers were deeply moved by the exhibit particularly the section which replicates the middle passage, the horrendous trip on slave ships from the African coasts to the regions of South America, Central America, the Caribbean and the North America.

According to the exhibit description, published by the Wright Museum:

“This long-term exhibition serves as the central experience of the museum. The 22,000 square-foot exhibition space contains more than 20 galleries that allow patrons to travel over time and across geographic boundaries. The journey begins in Africa, the cradle of human life. Guests witness several ancient and early modern civilizations that evolved on the continent. Cross the Atlantic Ocean, experience the tragedy of the middle passage and encounter those who resisted the horrors of bondage, emancipated themselves and sometimes took flight by way of the Underground Railroad. Throughout this trip, the efforts of everyday men and women who built families, businesses, educational institutions, spiritual traditions, civic organizations and a legacy of freedom and justice in past and present-day Detroit are hailed. What an awesome journey!”

Public Forum on African Presence and the Cuban Revolution

Another highlight of the visit by the Cuban writers was a public meeting sponsored by the Moratorium NOW! Coalition, the Michigan Emergency Committee Against War & Injustice, the Detroit MLK Committee and the Communist Workers League (CWL). The event was held on April 13 and drew a standing-room-only audience at the organizations’ offices located on Second Avenue in the Midtown District.

Opening remarks were made by **Dorothy Aldridge**, a veteran civil rights activist and former member of SNCC. Aldridge, a lifetime Detroit resident, explained the role of SNCC in the 1960s when they encouraged solidarity between African Americans and people of African descent around the world, including the Republic of Cuba.



Abayomi Azikiwe along with Cuban guests and friends during the African Presence and the Cuban Revolution Public Forum, April 13, 2019

The forum was addressed by both Arandia and Fernandez who discussed various aspects of the African experience in Cuba. They noted the centuries-long travails of enslavement and colonization along with the efforts of the Cuban Revolution to eradicate the last vestiges of racism inside the country.

Fernandez noted that any revolution was a process. Cuba had embarked upon a transformative undertaking in 1959 in an attempt to overthrow the institutional racism which was a hallmark of the systems of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Arandia, whose mother was an English teacher in Cuba and had participated in the rural educational campaign of the early 1960s which eradicated illiteracy in the country in a relatively short period of time, also spoke to the special role of women in the Revolution. She noted that no revolutionary exercise is completed in its early phase and that the liberation of women was an essential achievement in building a genuinely liberated society.

Dr. Caesar said of the meeting and visit, that:

“It was such a pleasure attending the African Presence and the Cuban Revolution event this weekend. I had the honor to spend the whole weekend with Afro Cuban scholars Gisela Arandia Covarrubias and Tomas Fernandez Robaina. It is always great to be among the Detroit community, Hush House Collective, African and African American Studies (AAAS) Family, and Wayne State partners.”

The following day on April 14, both guests attended the 39th Annual Michigan Coalition for Human Rights (MCHR) Annual Dinner held at Marygrove College. Arandia and Fernandez were seated at the table reserved for the Detroit MLK Committee. They were introduced to the crowd of 400 people and received an enthusiastic round of applause.



Cuban writer Gisela Arandia Covarrubias addressing the audience at the African Presence and the Cuban Revolution Forum on April 13, 2019 in Detroit (Photo by Abayomi Azikiwe)

Future Detroit Work on Cuba

When the Cuban writers were being driven to the train station during the morning hours of April 15, Fernandez remarked that his “visit to Detroit made him more determined to work for the realization of the ideals of the Revolution set out by Fidel Castro in 1959.” Both guests continued their national tour where they were scheduled to visit Kalamazoo and Boston among other cities.

The Cuban Caravan designed to oppose the ongoing blockade and express solidarity with the Caribbean nation located just 90 miles off the coast of Florida, will be stopping again in Detroit this coming July. Members of Moratorium NOW! Coalition and CWL are organizing events for the Pastors for Peace and Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) sponsored activity.

Also local activists have expressed interests in the 50th anniversary Venceremos Brigade. The event has enjoyed the participation of both youth and veteran CWL members over the years.

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