

# Hampshire in Havana

## Cuba Project Abstracts

### Theme: **Racial Identity and Racism**

---

The abstracts listed here are for projects done on the Hampshire in Havana Cuba program, related to the theme **Racial Identity and Racism**. Projects are listed by year beginning in 2008, with the most recent year first and then in alphabetical order by last name. For questions about specific projects, please contact the Global Education Office.

---

**Name:** Nadia Milad Issa

**Year:** S2018

**Tutor:** Eva Despaigne-Trujillo

**Title:** "Akpwanlá/Akpwón: Oral Traditions as Memory and Black Iyalochxs leading Yoruba Chants in Sacred Spaces"

**Topic:** Regla de Ocha-Ifá, Music, Black Womxn Akpwóns

**Medium:** Auto-Ethnography and Performance

While in Cuba, I studied music of the Regla de Ocha-Ifá religion, specifically Yoruba Chants (*Cantos Yoruba*), Patakis (Yoruba tales), and Womxn Akpwóns (ceremonial singers). Music, like dance in Ocha, is vital as they are both integral to rituals, ceremonies and initiations, celebrations, and homage. Concretely, I researched the hxstory of how Yoruba Chants and Patakis have been passed down and preserved. Doing this involved scholarly research with an expert in these traditions. I explored their present-day form and usage through ethnographic research methods that involved participant observation in both secular and religious spaces. I particularly centered Black Womxn and their participation in these spaces where men tend to dominate, as well as in Oral Hxstoral Traditions. Today I will be singing Yoruba Chants for Egún (ancestors), and Orishas Elegguá and Yemayá alongside company members of Obini Batá. Aché!

**Name:** Fynta Sidime

**Year:** S2018

**Tutor:** Isabel Bustos and Isnavi Cardoso Diaz

**Title:** "Contemporary Cuban Dance and Theater: Black Women in Performance Space"

**Topic:** Theater, Black artists, Black Women, Racism

**Medium:** Essay and Performance

My research in Cuba was to first understand how Afro Cuban women are making theater, as a young woman from guinea, I wanted to develop skills in theater making that I could bring into my community. I wanted to understand choices they make as a director or playwright how does that affect the concept of the piece. I was also interested in movement and so I was able to take dance classes at Danza Teatro Retazos, and one-on-one folklore with dance instructor Isnavi. My essay explore the absence of black women in dance and theater companies in Habana, and what it means to not see people that share my identity in theater. Based on interview and attending rehearsals by the two companies I was studying Danza Teatro Retazos and Teatro El Público I wrote about their performances. For my final presentation I will perform a monologue, the first part of an auto-biography I am writing for my senior thesis project. I integrated dance into this opening piece that talks about three generations of women and their experience of separation, migration and trauma.

**Name:** Zulay Holland

**Year:** S2017

**Tutor:** Zuleica Roman, and Gertrudis Y. Ortiz

**Title:** "A Romper el Silencio"

**Topic:** Artivism, Queerness, Racism, Sexism, Homophobia

**Medium:** Series of Workshops and Handmade Multimedia Magazine

The Project "To Break Silences" ("A Romper el Silencio") is a workshop/reunion space for black womxn/ non-binary<sup>1</sup> black people to talk about their experiences with racism, sexism, homophobia and a plethora of other ways in which we are socially discriminated against. Using the methodology found in Popular Education, I was able to co-facilitate 4 different workshops in which the objectives were:

Visualize and identify the plurality of women chicenegrx and African descendants

- To find common ground in 'artivism' of womxn chicenegrx and African descendants in the hip-hop movement, in the LGBTQ community, in heterosexuality and religiosity.
- To protect the integrity of the group of womxn/chicenegrx and African descendants.
- To create a platform to exchange information based on common interests.

Using this methodology, we were able to be able to create a space in which Black and Afro-Descendant womxn and non-binary people's experiences were centralized as knowledge, facilitating our ability to deconstruct taught histories and reconstruct our

---

<sup>1</sup> Non- binary refers to people who identify as gender non-conforming, two spirited, or as existing outside of the gender binary. Non-binary is used interchangeably with the word "chice", the gender non specific version of chica/o. The letter "x" replaces "a" or "o" in order to emphasize and include varying genders within the group.

own, from our self images as well as our socio-political positions. Within these workshops we were able to hear from the experiences of people from extremely diverse backgrounds, with varying ages, economic statuses, sexual orientations, and gender identifications. This work will be represented through a handmade multimedia magazine which contains theory, artistic contributions from participants, interviews, my own personal reflections and artwork.

**Name:** Asa Needle

**Year:** S2017

**Tutor:** Vivian Martínez Tabares

**Title:** “Blackness and Contemporary Cuban Theatre”

**Topic:** Blackness, Contemporary Cuban Theatre, Racism

**Medium:** Essay

To talk about Blackness in contemporary institutional Cuban theatre is to talk about interconnected and imbricated traditions, themes, sources, techniques, and goals. There is the legacy of slavery and resistance, in representations of the *cimarrón*, or escaped slave, and the *palenque*, or self-freed slave community. There is the influence, or direct reinterpretation, of Cuban religions with African roots, such as Santería, the *orishas*, and the *patakines*. There is the history of the racial impersonation through Blackface theatre starting in the middle 19th century and the nationalization of Blackness in the early 20th, which both make their legacy felt today. And there are the antiracist and antisexist projects that contemporary theatres engage in. I interviewed five prominent theatre-makers whose work engages with this matrix of Blackness, older established artists who have experienced and worked through the trajectory of Cuban history and its theatre. In these interviews we discussed themes such as the U.S. and tourism, marginality and gender, puppetry and children's theatre, and the role of public theatre in socialist society. I also analyze plays I saw throughout my time here, connecting these performances to the thematic above to illustrate the gamut of contemporary theatrical concerns.

**Name:** Nadia Milad Issa

**Year:** S2017

**Tutor:** Bárbara Balbuena

**Title:** “¡Oni Yemayá! Bailando Rezos Encima de el Piso”

**Topic:** Regla de Ocha-Ifá, Dance, Music, Blackness, Womxnhood

**Medium:** Ethnographic Essay and Dance Performance

My project in Cuba was to study Regla de Ocha-Ifá, a Cuban popular traditional religion of origin Yoruba, its manifestations in both music and dance, and the influences of the ritual dances of the Orishas in Danza Moderna. I also specifically looked at the relationship between Afro-Cuban womxn dancers with the divinities, fundamentally Yemayá. I analyzed the connections and differences between spaces of professional

dance, and the context of sacred spaces within the ceremonial ritual festives in this religion. The journey of this investigation is deep and personal, since I begun practicing Ocha, I now have an element of performance that is more profound, ancestral, and incredible. I feel the guidance of the Orishas, particularly when I dance. I wanted to know what has Ocha, and the Orishas, gifted to the Afro-Cuban womxn dancers who are practitioners of the religion, and those who are not initiated. For me, it was a dream come true, to be able to take Danza Moderna and Folklorica dance classes as well as having first hand experiences with ritual dances. This has filled my soul with happiness and love for the *Tambores*, *Güiros* and *Cajónes*. For the final presentation I will perform a co-choreographed solo of Today Yemayá's *yakotá*, *omolode*, y *chachalokafu* toques. Aché to all!

**Name:** Cliff Robins

**Year:** S2016

**Tutor:** Rafael Rodríguez Beltrán

**Title:** Slowly Exploding: perspective in Cuban antislavery literature throughout time

**Medium:** Essay

Mi proyecto explora los múltiples puntos de vista de la literatura cubana sobre el tema de la esclavitud y la representación que han tenido tanto los esclavos como los negros libres en el decursar de la historia, y la forma como han sido reflejados en la literatura, concretamente en cinco textos: *Sab* de Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda; *Cecilia Valdés* de Cirilio Villaverde; *El siglo de las Luces* de Alejo Carpentier; *Biografía de un cimarrón* de Miguel Barnet; y *Una Biblia perdida* de Ernesto Peña. Estas cinco obras narrativas subvierten los puntos de vista de la esclavitud, la raza y la discriminación, temas álgidos en el momento de su publicación. Dentro de su contexto histórico, también demuestran un cambio de diálogo respecto a la raza dentro de la sociedad. Al concebir este proyecto, me interesé por la forma en que esos textos han confrontado las ideas convencionales sobre la sociedad negra en Cuba, así como su contribución al cambio social y la manera en que la literatura cubana puede dar continuidad a estos temas en el futuro.

**Name:** Miari Stephens

**Year:** S2015

**Tutor:** Daisy Rubiera

**Title:** *Nuestro Cabello*

**Topic:** Black Women's Hair

**Medium:** Essay

Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper examines the personal and social significance of Black Women's hair in Havana. Hair carries a significant importance especially for Black women, as it is often classified as a marker of economic or social status, racial identity and personal aesthetic or expression. I conducted over twenty interviews throughout Havana with Black women from the ages of 21-78, residing in various municipalities, with different occupations and a variety of hair textures. Using

two key concepts—material conditions and personal, intimate experiences--I investigate Black women's hair as a manifestation of survival. On one hand, Black women's hairstyling can affect their role in the workplace or job market, as many jobs require a specific, limiting *presencia* that predominately targets black features. Thus, the manner in which a Black woman styles her hair may be crucial for her material or economic livelihood. On the other hand, hair can be a form of personal expression that allows Black women to appreciate and love their beauty. In this sense, hairstyling constitutes a form of personal self-survival for Black women— a technique to navigate of a world that devalues and criticizes their features.

**Name:** Dylan Fitzwater

**Year:** S2015

**Tutor:** Zuleica Romay

**Title:** "The Red Barrial Afrodescendiente: New Possibilities for Anti-Racist Organizing in Cuba"

**Medium:** Essay

This essay analyzes a community organization called the Red Barrial Afrodescendiente [Afrodescendent Neighborhood Network] in order to explore the possibilities for community based anti-racist organizing in Cuba. The Red Barrial Afrodescendiente is a network of small community organizations that was founded in 2012. It has chapters in the neighborhoods of Balcón Arimao, Pogolotti, Buena Vista, Alamar Playa, Párraga, Jesús María, La Ceiba, and Los Ángeles. All of these neighborhoods are predominantly Afro-Cuban with social realities shaped by complex systems of racism and marginalization, realities which the Red Barrial confronts in its community work. In the essay, I analyze the material and discursive aspects of racism and marginalization in Cuba as they have developed since the triumph of the Cuban revolution, with particular attention to the new social context created by the Special Period. I then take up the example of the Red Barrial Afrodescendiente and show how their community work addresses the intersecting systems of racism, marginalization, and sexism in the local context of these neighborhoods. I argue that the Red Barrial deploys a counterdiscourse articulated by and for the community that critiques racism, sexism and marginalization, while also developing concrete projects which aim to address the material problems of these communities. Through this analysis, I argue that the Red Barrial illustrates the possibilities and importance of community based anti-racist organizing in changing the daily lives of marginalized Afro-Cubans. communities through participatory organizing from below.

**Name:** Samantha King

**Year:** S2012

**Tutor:** Julio César Guanche

**Title:** "Sin el negro Cuba no ser'a Cuba: Impacts of Race in Cuba"

**Medium:** Essay

Samantha's research explores the topic of race in post Revolutionary Cuba. Beginning with a brief introduction to the history of race, her 38-page analytical paper focused on how the Revolution sought to eradicate race through means of legislation and its eventual silencing of the topic within social discourse. Race resurfaced during the Special Period (1989-2006), augmenting problems of prejudice and racism that had previously existed but lain dormant during the 1970s and 80s. With this amplification emerged artistic and intellectual discourses designed to publicly address the problems that persist today. Samantha's essay explores some of these works along with political demands in an attempt to realize some possible changes in the way racial prejudice interacts with and impacts the general Cuban public.

**Name:** Aurelis Troncoso

**Year:** S2015, S2014

**Tutor:** Lázara Menéndez

**Title:** "Mujeres de Ocha: Voces con fuego en la lengua"

**Medium:** Poetry, Performance

Afrocuban culture has had a strong presence within Cuban society since the arrival of Africans who were enslaved in the fifteenth century and onward. Africans brought with them a number of religions, which continue to serve as a form of resistance and a way to preserve African traditions. *Mujeres de Ocha: Voces con fuego en la lengua* is the initiation of an investigation that began with my particular interest in black Cuban womyn's resistance within religions of African origin, specifically Regla de Ocha-Ifá. Black Cuban womyn face several forms of discrimination as they are positioned at the intersection of race and gender in the larger society, in addition to having to navigate spiritual spaces that are predominantly occupied by men. These power dynamics in turn impose limitations on womyn in the religion itself, despite the fact that womyn in this religion initially held roles as obba (master of ceremonies), oriate (diviner of diloggun), and as iyanifas (priestesses of Ifá). Throughout this investigation I have attended religious ceremonies, social gatherings, folkloric performances, and interviewed a number of womyn and men who practice Regla de Ocha-Ifá, regarding the representations of womyn in the religion and their opinions regarding the initiation of womyn into Ifá. In these participations I have observed the different tasks that womyn perform and how notions of patriarchy influenced such spaces and are denounced.

**Name:** Courtney Hooks  
**Year:** S2009  
**Tutor:** Rodrigo Espina  
**Title:** Negra Luz/Black Light  
**Topic:** Black women  
**Medium:** Essay, Multimedia

I hope to raise the voices of black women and shine light on their life experiences from their points of view. For too long, the experiences of black women have been devalued, silenced, and erased. Enough already! I interviewed 35 women from diverse ages, vocations, economic situations, regions, skin colors, and hair types. We talked about various themes, including: how they view different forms of racism; the process of racial identity; the beauty ideals of black people; and their experiences with hair, hairdressers, perms, and other products. I am so grateful to all of the women who participated in and supported me throughout this project. They shared their food, their homes, their time, and above all, their truths.

Through this herstory I realized that hair is a site of happiness and pain, community and independence, oppression, and liberty. I would like all black women to know that we are beautiful as we are. Our natural state is not "broken" and doesn't need to be automatically "fixed." Our hair, our skin colors, our features don't need to be changed for anything or anyone.

In this project I use hair as a window through which I analyze racial identity and the position of black women in Cuban society. With these photos and interviews, I hope that the women in my project can illuminate their own stories and awaken some people that still don't know what significance the hair of black Cubanas holds, those who don't know that hair tells a grand tale.

**Name:** Divad Durant  
**Year:** S2008  
**Tutor:** Nelson Rodríguez  
**Title:** Black Expressions  
**Medium:** N/A

Black Expressions covers the various artist who work around theme of race and marginalization in Cuba. Black Expression creates a synthesis of the complexities of Afro-Cuban identity in Cuba. The history of slavery has created similar experiences of Blackness across the Atlantic. The expressions of the artist do not only address issues of racism that still exist in Cuba, they also suggest the need to create a more comprehensive understanding of Cuban identity.

**Name:** Mo Mulderig

**Year:** S2008

**Tutor:** María Cristina Aldana

**Title:** "Buscando la raya: searching for the line"

**Medium:** Creative Writing

It began with the question of race. Or maybe, it began much earlier, when I was a child growing up inside a very white, rural city where liberalism and idealism blocked out any home, I have learned that my whiteness, like any other skin color, carries with it a meaning beyond my personal identity...beyond my control? How much of my identity is constructed by how others perceive my body? In discussions about racism in Cuba, I found that instead of the racial segregation I believe still exists in the United States, in order to hide racism the Cuban socialist state has used language to emphasize a stronger sense of collectivity than individuality: Todos somos iguales. We are all equal. Nosotros tomamos café. We drink coffee. Or, as my teacher María Cristina challenges: Nosotros no tomamos café. We don't drink coffee. Thinking of the capitalist culture where I come from, I am reminded of the overbearing weight given to the "I," rather than the "We." How can a balance be found between these extremes so that one isn't eliminated, hidden, denied? I don't want to speak for anyone beside myself. I don't want to represent something beyond my own body and what it knows. But I know that the richness of life comes from our differences, like how each of us perceives the meaning of a simple gesture differently. And so, I have been exploring my relationship with Cuba and Cubans through one body- white, female, feminine, and foreign. I'm looking for the line drawn between the individual body and the collective body that I have felt and imagined, though never seen.