

## **CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ Academic Summer Camp**

Cuba  
Brandeis University  
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Summary: *CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ was an academic summer camp for Afro-Cuban youth in an under-resourced neighborhood of Havana aiming to offset the complex issues of racism and poverty by offering youth an opportunity to develop in four areas: expressive arts, Afro Cuban History, English language and technology.*

I had received collaborative research grants from Brandeis University to work with members of CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ on recording oral histories on Cuban Hip Hop. While these were not strictly fundraising efforts, they helped CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ purchase equipment and pay salaries to tutors.

We came up with the idea for the summer camp collaboratively through my involvement with CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ. This project was an extension of the community education work CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ was already doing. We added a specific focus on English language and technology into a summer program. I previously worked at an academic summer camp in New Orleans, which provided me with some of the idea of how this could be structured for this project in Cuba.

The two issues that we are responding to are poverty and racism. The reason that there is rampant poverty in Cuba is mostly because the US embargo on Cuba has strangled its economy. Eighty percent of the working population in Cuba is employed by the government and the average salary is \$29 a month. However, the specific disadvantage of afro-Cuban families is due to the legacy of slavery and colonialism. While the Cuban revolution alleviated overall poverty rates, it did not account for the historical disadvantages of Afro-Cubans. This oversight accounts for the fact that today the majority of Afro-Cubans disproportionately suffer from poverty. Most families supplement their low government wages through work in the tourist industry, others by receiving remittances from abroad. Afro-Cubans are at a disadvantage in both of these areas. Most employers in the tourism industry prefer to hire lighter-skinned Cubans, and Afro-Cubans are less likely to have family members living abroad who can send remittances. Children who live in poverty in Cuba are unable to afford the after-school tutors that would enable them to continue studies at the university, and therefore move up in life.

I chose to work in Havana, Cuba because I studied abroad there and had been back twice since then. I chose to work with Magia, Tomás, Alexey, Aracely, and Zurbano because I already had a relationship with them and greatly respected the work they did in Havana. I come from a community organizing background and believe that strong relationships built on trust and communication are the backbone of any successful project. Furthermore, they have been promoting Afro-Cuban history and identity for over twenty years. They have a strong presence in Regla (a municipality in Havana) and bring decades of experience in the academic world as well as in the performing arts.

Through this project, I had the opportunity to work with individuals who are inspirational leaders in their field. Alexey Rodríguez and Magia López are two rappers from the groundbreaking hip hop group OBSESION. These cultural icons have been leading community initiatives for over twenty years that focus on fomenting Black racial pride and identity through the arts. For instance, last summer they hosted a Black doll making workshop for children. The project brought awareness to the lack of Black representation in children's toys. Tomás Fernández Robaina is a professor at the University of Havana and a researcher at the National Library in Havana. He has published groundbreaking works on Afro-Cuban history including *El negro en Cuba 1902-1958: Apuntes para la historia de la lucha contra la discriminación racial* (The Blacks in Cuba 1902-1958: Notes on the history of the struggle against racial discrimination) and *Antología del pensamiento antirracista Cubano* (Anthology of Antiracist Cuban Thought). Roberto Zurbano is a writer, editor, cultural critic and racial justice activist. Zurbano was formerly chief editor of the famed Casa de Las Américas publishing house. Aracely Rodríguez Malagón is an activist and scholar of Black Feminism. She is currently publishing, *"Pensamiento Feminista Negro en el Caribe"* (Black Feminist Thought in the Caribbean).

It was nice to work in Havana. I have many friends and colleagues there who I was able to invite to be involved with the work of CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ. I never felt like the project was not going to work, I just knew everything would move slower than I expected and that I would have to be flexible. The biggest challenge is helping to find a suitable long-term space for CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ. For now, they rented out a space in Centro Havana. However, eventually they want to raise enough money to purchase a space in Regla, their home neighborhood. Another challenge was that Havana regularly reaches 95 degrees and 95 percent humidity in the summer. The heat was incredibly difficult and sometimes proved challenging.

My biggest communication challenges were cultural rather than linguistic. Cuba moves at a very different pace. There are different expectations for punctuality. I had to get used to meetings and classes starting 30-45 minutes late. I learned that these delays provided a great time to make small talk and build relationships.

Peace is freedom. Nina Simone said, "I'll tell you what freedom is to me. No fear." So, I would say living in peace means living without fear. Our project contributes to build and promote peace in the short-term by helping Afro-Cuban youth find and feel at peace within themselves, within their bodies, and in their identities.

What a violence for Afro-Cuban youth to grow up with school curricula that overlooks the many Afro-Cuban artists, activists, and thought leaders who speak to a uniquely Afro-Cuban experience. What a violence to live with media that tells you that your skin, nose, and hair are less beautiful than your peers with more Eurocentric features. What a violence! To live with more poverty and less opportunity than your white peers, but not have the historical context to understand why, or a forum to express that reality is unthinkable.

The CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ Summer Camp contributed to peace by mitigating these injustices and violences and developing the students' self-esteem and racial identity. Robaina's history curricula resuscitates Afro-Cubans from the roles of passive subjects who were acted upon to fundamental agents of change in the history of Cuba. López and Rodríguez's arts programming mobilizes rapping, singing, and visual arts to help students express their unique experience. When students get to see their work as part of a legacy of Afro-Cuban activism, and global diasporic art, learning comes alive and their self-confidence grows; students can see themselves as leaders and vital members in their community.

In the long-term, our project contributes to peace by building leaders who can empower their communities and fight for equality amongst races. Furthermore, by building collaborative relationships between the United States and Cuba, we can work together to offset the injustices of poverty, and in the long-term, work toward building a peaceful relationship between the two countries.

Working with CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ has helped me realize that race is constructed differently all over the world. While White Supremacy is a global blight, it functions differently in every context. Spanish colonialists never used the one-drop rule in Cuba, but rather opted for a tiered racial class system that accounted for many shades and phenotypic variations. As a result, one hundred years later, the particular brand of race-blindness that CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ faces in Cuba, is best captured in the phrase "Todos somos Cubanos, todos somos mezclados, con herencia Africana" which translates to "We are all Cubans, we are all mixed, with African heritage." In Cuba, I met a lot of very light-skinned people who uttered this phrase. While it is beautiful to live somewhere where people proudly claim their African heritage, it erases the very concrete ways that darker-skinned Cubans are discriminated against. On the flip side, it is true that there is less segregation than in the United States.

How has working with CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ changed how I view the world? I have hope. Living in Cuba, I see a model that in many ways reflects the world I want to build: no gun violence, universal health-care, and higher education. However, at the same time, working daily with Cubans who live in poverty takes the sheen off of my romanticized view of Cuba.

Working with CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ has also helped me grapple with the privilege of nationality. My passport allows me to travel safely almost anywhere in the world. My Cuban friends' travel is highly restricted however by high costs and foreign governments' unwillingness to provide visas.

*"I am honored to have had the opportunity to work with university professors, musicians, visual artists, and writers to host the CLUB DEL ESPENDRÚ Academic summer camp in Havana. I encourage everyone to do their best to build collaborative relationships between the U.S. and Cuba.  
#NoMasBloqueo"*

*~ Gabriel Fontes*

