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Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow

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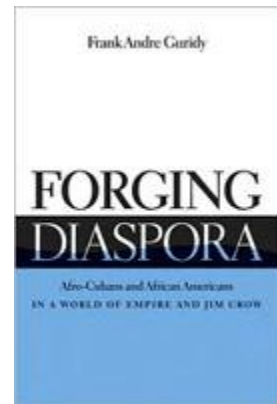
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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Frank Andre Guridy. *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow*. University of North Carolina Press, 2010. xiv + 270 pp., \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3361-2; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7103-4.



Reviewed for H-Florida by Jeff Donnelly, Miami Design Preservation League

Ninety Miles Away, But Not So Far Apart

Frank Andre Guridy has produced a fascinating study of "cross national exchange between Afro-Cubans and African Americans" (p. 2). While the focus of this book is on four specific stories, the author's ambitions extend to commentary on the phenomenon of diaspora, the awareness and kaleidoscopic expression of a people's migration in multiple national and temporal contexts. Guridy contends that "Afro-descended peoples in Cuba and the United States came to identify themselves as being part of a transcultural African diaspora, an identification that did not contradict black aspirations for national citizenship" (p. 4). In development of his thesis, Guridy has selected four exemplary moments in U.S. and Cuban republican history: Booker T. Washington's effort to enroll Afro-Cubans in his Tuskegee Institute, the role of Garveyism in Cuba, the interface of the Harlem Renaissance and *afrocubanismo*, and the development of Afrocentric tourism in Cuba and the United States before the Cuban Revolution.

Guridy has uncovered a Tuskegee-Cuba connection not widely noted in other commentary. From archival sources, Guridy documents the efforts of Washington to enable African-descended students from other nations, including Cuba, to attend his Tuskegee Institute. Guridy concludes that Cubans attending Tuskegee were able to use that experience as a way to achieve upward mobility in Cuban society, especially in the field of architecture, a program that attracted most of the successful male Afro-Cubans at Tuskegee. The building housing the major twentieth-century Afro-Cuban cultural center, Club Atenas, was designed by a Tuskegee alumnus, Luis Delfin Valdes.

In his second example, Guridy points out that Cuba had more "divisions" or chapters of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) than any other country outside the United States. Garvey's cosmopolitan movement not only involved people of varying nationalities, but also relied on the efforts of many whose life stories included extensive migrations among Caribbean countries and the United States. These migrations, in Guridy's view, contributed to the creation of a diasporic consciousness, sometimes expressed as "the Negro peoples of the world." Guridy also locates the role of Garveyism in Cuba, highlighting the tensions the UNIA movement produced in a society not fully comfortable with its multiracial reality and its racial hierarchies.

Langston Hughes appears in the third segment of Guridy's story, which includes a detailed account of Hughes and his search for the "heartbeat and songbeat of Africa" in Cuba (p. 135). This is perhaps the most developed section of *Forging Diaspora* and where the specific examples selected by Guridy best exemplify his thesis: African Americans and Afro-Cubans discovered a commonality without losing their nationality. Poetry, art, sculpture, and music all figure in the development of this section, but the most vivid moments occur when Hughes discovers that the patrons and musicians of the Afro-Cuban dance halls are "Mi gente" (p. 133).

The final section of Guridy's work describes the advent of African American tourism in Cuba and Afro-Cuban visits to the United States. In both cases, the tourists had to overcome obstacles arising from racial discrimination, and Guridy provides some revealing examples of the comparison and contrast between the racial hierarchies of the United States and Cuba. In this section, racial uplift, advocacy for civil rights, and black entrepreneurship combine in complex ways, delineating and overcoming the racialization of leisure in both countries. Guridy highlights the role of Howard University in this period.

Guridy relates each of these four stories in a felicitous summation of his extensive archival research. He provides, from each of the stories, evidence that both African Americans and Afro-Cubans developed an awareness of their common experience and national differences through their contacts. His work presumes some basic knowledge of African American history in the United States, the imperial project of the United States, the history of race relations in the Cuban republic, and the wider intellectual and cultural context of *negritude*. At the end, Guridy's book provokes more questions than it provides answers. *Forging Diaspora* will encourage readers to explore more deeply by demonstrating that substantial understanding of any one of these topics requires a better understanding of the others.

Guridy discussed his book further in the context of American imperialism and the African diapora at the African American History Panel at the Harlem Book Fair, on July 10, 2010. In this discussion, He offered a more concise statement of his concept of the African diaspora. His comments can be heard or read at <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/294543-6&showFullAbstract=1>.

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