

Erroneous Visions

Jorge Olivera Castillo
Writer and Journalist
Havana, Cuba

It might be futile to try explaining the phenomenon of race in Cuba, particularly if the ones doing the explaining are African Americans. A representative bloc of them from the arts, culture, and religious communities, as well as a good number of black politicians, believe that nearly fifty years ago Cuba's still ruling government was successful in creating an integrated society based on egalitarian ideals, free of the inherent ethno-racial identities of its citizens.

The legitimization the United States African American community lends to this notion tends to make this situation more complex, because it distorts the nature of what actually occurs on the Island. Unwittingly perhaps, and caught somewhere between a certain degree of naïveté and a subconscious and an unpleasant memory of centuries of discrimination, U.S. blacks have contributed to widening the margins of the silence and distortion surrounding an issue that in Cuba needs thorough study and a level of understanding far beyond any attempt to turn it into a case of reverse discrimination.

Today, there are still certain tensions in Cuba, which, like others, may be the result of

a lack of civil and political freedoms. Black Cubans have remained at the margins or limits of the possibilities offered by a paternalistic and controlling State. Of course, one must acknowledge its success with regard to national education, but only to a certain point. Certain specialties are still plagued by prejudices; subtle tactics keep black students from signing up for them.

Because Cuban blacks have de facto internalized ethical and aesthetic concepts, and ideas about an assumed intellectual inferiority, about the incompatibility of certain facial features with beauty, and the classification of blacks as a species good for only erotic sexual acts, the problem of racism has taken on new dimensions.

It can be extremely difficult to try untangling the complicated web of racial discrimination. The high rate of miscegenation in Cuba has fueled the creation of new racial categories in which many who have light skin can define themselves as whites; notwithstanding, a detailed examination of them reveals their Negroid features.

An increase in sexual tourism, which the government discreetly accepts, and in mar-

riages between Cuban and Old World foreigners, and the consolidation of rap as one of the most popular and cultivated music genres—mostly by black youth—have all contributed to Cuba’s black population achieving some kind of recognition—sometimes negative—as in the case of black citizens being classified as high demand sex objects.

Rap does allow for the channeling of quite a few black values: it helps build black self esteem, which is often at the mercy of the government’s populist rhetoric, and articulates protests against constant political harassment.

Rap also encourages interracial relationships, possible, of course, through a partial departure from traditional ideas and breaking of taboos that disadvantage this sector of the Cuban population.

Despite all these new developments, the stigma of having more pigmented skin still persists. The more black someone is, the more vulnerable, too. Many mothers of white daughters still caution their daughters “not to show up [here] with a black guy.” The same thing can be heard in the homes of young white men.

Given this rejecting environment, I have to say that the offspring of these Cuban interracial couples often have a hard time—although there are some exceptions. Family pressure functions as a disincentive. If need be, families can at the last minute accept a “black person” into the house, but it is not really the most desirable of situations.

Black families are more tolerant, particularly the darker ones. Although they do not say as much, they want to move towards more miscegenation. They know it is one way of alleviating the burden of discrimination. A flat-nosed, curly-haired, light-skinned grandson does have a better chance of mix-

ing in with the white racists—a group that controls a large part of the country’s economy and politics.

It is not my intention to pin anyone down or become an accuser of my race but unfortunately, what I am driving at continues to be obfuscated by the manipulation of those in power, an approach to the subject that results in nothing more than a mild discomfort full of artifice and rhetoric.

There are Cubans who resist the notion that there is racism in their country, but ethnic jokes in which blacks are the idiotic or marginal characters have not changed. How many blacks live in Miramar mansions? Why do they represent a majority of the prison and jail population?

Sound the Alarms

I have a hard time understanding how a famous African American writer like Alice Walker can totally believe in the rhetoric of a revolution that devolved into a never-ending dictatorship. It would be great to be able to tell her about the drama that hundreds of black Cuban families live, to get her to see and hear what really happens beyond that revolutionary imaginary that highlights the debatable gains of a system based on censorship and the total prohibition of anything that goes against the one and only party’s mandate.

Walker looks benevolently upon those who have left Cuban blacks in a quasi limbo. The country’s masters pawn themselves off as emancipators; they take on the role of enthusiastic defenders of the dispossessed in Africa, of being in solidarity with the victims—mostly New Orleans blacks—of Hurricane Katrina.

“Socialism’s” political machinery actively seeks out personalities who can help sus-



tain its own power; it has garnered the voice and will of an imminent U.S. black intellectual. The response of other sympathizers from within the African American community has been exuberant.¹ Some of the most notable ones are the Reverend Lucius Walker, the Nation of Islam's leader Louis Farrakhan, actors Harry Belafonte and Danny Glover, Congresswomen Maxine Waters; no less important are the many others from this very important U.S. minority group who follow suit.

Support for the Cuban dictatorship might be explained by the racial and racist extremes that blacks endured in the U.S. Southern states, beginning in the seventeenth century, when African slaves first began to arrive. All the cold-blooded killings, marginalization, biting sarcasm, humiliating circumstances, school and social segregation that were perpetrated by fanatical whites who enjoyed the direct and indirect support of accessorial and indifferent authorities, has left a permanent mark of rebellion on the

black community—even now. That cruelty, and the memory of its barbarity, still fuels efforts to heal the wounds of the past and vehemently fight the discriminatory actions of whites who continue to deny people their equal rights—regardless of the skin color.

Another thing that might explain why our U.S. brothers and sisters insist on identifying with the regime in Havana is the Cuban government's constant criticism of the American government, other institutions, and the use of any other opportune time to criticize the system's deficiencies—which, like any other, does have its faults and needs rectification.

What is often lost from view, however, is the ability to channel doubts, complaints, constitutional violations and excesses of any sort in the U.S. It is not believable to point to the U.S. model as the worst in the world—despite the fact it doesn't always work or the means by which justice can be sought are not always clearly available. Yet, no citizen of Cuba can express him or herself freely. It is important to note that those who might have different ideas and want to express or publish them in Cuba have no way to do so or any legal protection. There are hundreds of Cubans—including blacks—behind bars for exercising that right.

One thing that needs to be introduced into Cuba is the right of debate—to have a straightforward and transparent dialog. If we guide ourselves by what the Communist Party-controlled Cuban media are presenting, acts of racism occur only in areas of the United States, in almost all European countries, and in the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel. We are shown gypsies, African descendants, and Arabs as victims of the white power elites.

While we should not deny the truth about the evident rejection of those people,

we do need to acknowledge that black Cubans are at the lowest echelons of a republic that was built upon the efforts of blacks and whites who for years fought to be rid of Spanish colonialism's yoke. This subject is much more complex than some might think, others doubt, and yet others forget. How can a country with so high a rate of miscegenation during the past fifty years of socialist revolution continue to suffer from so much racism? It would be laudable for Americans to become interested in answering the call of those in Cuba who want a public explanation for the exclusion of blacks or their limited participation in activities in which they should be represented equally.

As a black man, I am concerned about the specter of racism in my country. I would love to be able to count on solidarity from the well-known poet and narrator regarding my efforts to legitimate pluralism, tolerance and true racial equality in Cuba. Will Alice Walker extend her hand to me?

Notes:

Alice Walker wrote the prologue to the book *El Dulce Abismo*, a collection of correspondence between five Cubans accused of spying for the U.S. Federal Court and their families. The Cuban government has made them into heroes and is paying—a useless and countless amount of money—to win them their freedom.