

# Being Black Twice Over

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**B**lack people born in Oriente, Cuba, are blacks twice over. I'd like to clarify that this is how they are perceived.

First, because blacks from this region live in such precarious economic, social, and cultural conditions, they appear to be living in slave barracks, according to the popular perception of many authorities and citizens of the capital. What we'd be able to call the social black: someone who is seen as having somewhat darker skin, because of his or her precarious living conditions.

Second, because of their alleged habit of stealing, getting drunk, fighting, not knowing how to express themselves, and being ingrates, which they have inherited from their dual position as blacks and orientals (citizens from the eastern provinces of Cuba), and what is seen as a marginalized black person because he or she performs on the margins of society.

But none of this has any relation to reality. There are more than enough examples of ability and honesty in people who live within that marginality, who despite suffering the geographic fatalism of their skin color, excel in the highest and most diverse intellectual and craft-related areas of the country's industry.

That is not the case, however, in the political realm. The reasons for this are all too well known: the impossibility or limited access of black people to holding high-level power positions (at the national level), as the composition of the Cuban government has shown over the past fifty years. Despite the actual "ethnographic" composition of the nation, there is no proportional representation in Cuba.

Yet, I am not motivated to write this article to offer up gratuitous praise or an impassioned defense of individual examples but rather to dis-

cuss the origin, evolution, and current context of racism with which people of color from eastern Cuba must cope.

I feel compelled to point out that Afro-Cubans who primarily descend from the Haitian immigration that settled in the coffee regions of Guantánamo since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and from Jamaica and other Caribbean countries, who in the early twentieth century began to work at the sugar cane plantations of San Germán, Holguín: Bartolomé Masó, in Granma province: San Luis, in Santiago de Cuba: and Jobabo and Manatí, in Las Tunas, are not victims of the kind of racism one finds in the capital.

As bearers of a rooted identity that forged their customs with those of the natives of the Guantánamo region, Haitians managed to insert themselves from the very beginning in the birth, evolution, and consolidation of the Cuban nationality.

Surnames like Duffaux, Rigondeaux, Lescayllers, Bhartelemí, and others, and cultural traditions like the French Tumba dance, the Nengón rhythm, and Haitian culinary specialties, merged with customs identified with the native people or African descendants of the region to create a melting pot of nationalities that has no racial discrimination at the most basic level of society, because the majority of its inhabitants are either black or of African origin.

Of course, it is one thing to say there are fewer incidents of racism amongst the population of the eastern part of the country (except in the municipality of Holguín); it is quite another to discuss the discriminatory treatment they receive regarding opportunities in diverse sectors of that society. Whitening is the goal for the superstructure.

Only three percent of the black people from Santiago and Guantánamo hold positions of responsibility in emerging economic sectors like tourism, despite the fact they are the majority in these eastern provinces.

Notwithstanding, and despite this racism, blacks from these two provinces are sent to Havana in work contingents, one of the few ways for them to go there and not be sent back to their regions as illegals. This is a racist policy of deportation that I don't think is very common in many societies.

Contingents like the José Luis Tassende or the Desembarco de Granma, among others tied to the construction sector, have completed and are now working on projects, to the dismay of the Revolution's ideological apparatus; most of them are 'barracooned' blacks.

Blacks brought from the east are the main employees at polyclinics, daycare centers, projects related to the so-called Battle of Ideas initiative, hospitals such as the Hermanos Amejeiras Surgical Clinic, and hotels for foreigners.

While they are in the capital, they face housing that is so subhuman it causes them to quit work; this is in addition to the low salaries, and difficulties they face with food procurement and transportation. These are the ways in which discrimination is the most real for them. During their stay in Havana, their social life is impossible, limited only to the areas where they are working.

They face the threat of being intercepted anywhere they go, followed by an agent who demands their ID card, reasons for their presence in the capital, and other clarifications that could otherwise send them to jail. This makes it impossible for them to go any workers' clubs. Any black people in a capital city work contingent are always considered undesirables, even though they are there to work.

Expressions like "he's black and an easterner" and "not only is he black, but a hillbilly too" represent the worst of racist phrases that can be heard among whites in Havana but also among Havana blacks who feel superior in bearing and

aspect, economic possibilities, and intellectual development, even if they've never worked and barely know how to read or write. This is geographically based 'intraracism.'

This is exactly my point. The thing about the racial prejudices that eat away at Cuban society is that they are not caused by the many centuries of slavery, discrimination, or other evils; they are caused by social and labor differences that stem from the fact that blacks are limited in their ability to fully evolve and have equal opportunities.

Discrimination against blacks and further prejudice against them if they are from the eastern provinces is born in the streets of Old Havana, in the wanton and trashy pleasures of Central Havana, or in the well constructed streets and beautifully manicured gardens of Miramar's Fifth Avenue.

To be black and eastern in the capital of all Cubans is like being black twice over.

This is a reproduction of the Creole elite mindset of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when laborers from Haiti or Jamaica were brought to work on plantations after the abolition of slavery twenty years earlier. Many of their offspring are now brought to the capital for employment in those emerging or constant jobs that residents of Havana don't want to do. Just like their forbears, they are controlled and dejected as soon as they begin to "disturb" the city's peace with "their customs," which locals do not understand. They are also called 'Palestineans,' meaning people who are seen as strange or foreign, another reflection of this double blackness, and evidence of the disdain there is against those who don't reflect "our" western culture.

There is no racism in Revolutionary Cuba say the defenders and detractors of the subject; yet, there is indeed racial prejudice, and it mounts up and explodes on every street corner in the nation, even more so if the person not only has the "wrong" skin color but is also from eastern Cuba.