

Anti-Black Racial Discrimination and Resistance to It

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As they negotiate narrow and diverse paths in their search for recognition, and often for conscious, unfettered, self-acknowledgment, discriminated groups should be extremely cautious about not reproducing stereotypes that others have constructed about and imposed on them. They should not allow this to happen through some action within or by their own group, or by some other group, even those whose intention it is to help them but also harbor prejudices acquired through their own (mis)education.

The world, with its myriad relational practices, would seem to be progressing towards horizontality (this can be seen as something necessary, what “should happen,” and coincides with what many consider as something they “want to happen”). This is what occurs when one has groups that are not homogeneous, as is quite often the case, socially. There needs to be space for their plurality, but a truly fulfilled pluralism that includes recognition and validation, and makes space for all kinds of social expressions, even power relations.

The human tendency to make impositions should not find safe harbor in places or spaces whose first and foremost purpose is acknowledgment: acceptance, with equity, in greater society. The deconstruction of stereotypes that were historically constructed about discriminated groups should be their most important and essential concern. The falseness of all the criticism made of these people, and the wants for which they themselves are held responsible by people who dare not ever admit their own faults—which undeniably exists in all social groups—need to be clarified. Otherwise, this is an obstacle to renovation and improvement.

Necessary (self)recognition

Cuba’s black population needs to show its diversity. No one should attempt to self-elect him or herself as a leader or, more specifically, as the controller and representative of this population’s feelings. Leaders should emerge spontaneously, not impose themselves. This condition implies that whoever receives recognition by any given group

will have earned it by dint of his or her responsible, effective, and impactful efforts. This person will be known for his or her track record.

Those of us in Cuba who are consciously and openly against racism should consult history and continue our examination of this phenomenon till the present day—with a view to the future. In this context, racism means being essentially anti-black, since it is blacks and mulattoes who have most suffered from discrimination. History itself compels us to prioritize its recovery—written or not—and disseminate it, so that it can help us forge citizens and not automata. For Cuba's black population, this implies that it must find a way to acknowledge itself as Afro-Cuban; be conscious of itself, of its place in the national landscape; of its responsibilities, obligations, and rights. It must also unprejudicially, firmly, and boldly be conscious of the respect it deserves.

That will not happen while this large part of the foundational and sustaining population of Cuba doesn't go through a stage of sociological development. This is undeniably the case, despite the fact we are warned by a dangerous and outdated theory (one that has been revived by technological and genetic advances, but always serves racialized ideology). It says that once we achieve greater, sustained biological miscegenation, we will no longer be black men and women, which even if true, doesn't seem to keep us safe from being discriminated against.

Racism is a historical construct of modernity. It was forceably imposed on us in the Americas. The logic behind this categorization reflects the power relations by which men became slave owners or slaves based upon their skin color and other phys-

ical traits. Since its inception, it has been the method by which Indo-Afro-Latin American reality is measured. Racism is a daily reality by which those in power attempt to distinguish between those who are and aren't inferior—but this always involves black or non-white skin. We must remember that Cuba is not physically situated in Africa but rather in Afro-America. Class distinctions here were invariably proportional to phenotype and the quantity of melanin in one's skin: that is what became known as "race," and this has not changed. The truth of this can be proved by simply touring residential neighborhoods like Miramar or Kohly, and much less affluent ones like Colón and San Ignacio.

Stereotypes vs. Empowerment

Ever since the establishment of the Cuban Republic, its black population has been consigned to political oblivion, which does not mean it has not participated in the process but that it has had to fight for its ability to do so. This was not seen as natural by the dominant, *criollo* elite. This population has long been pressed to remain in the ghetto, only allowed to exit it when it was to satisfy the needs of their white compatriots, even for distraction's sake. Worse yet, it has been made to believe that its "mission" in the national project is to remain just so. This assured that black and *mestizo* Cubans continued uninterested in politics.

"They're so funny," "All of them dance," "All black women are whores": we are unbothered when we hear these things, and even believe them. What seem like positive, laudatory statements—"error!" or "horror!"—have been identified as signs of distinction with which many come to

(self)identify. The rest of the Cubans are kept in the dark by deeply racialized statements that reproduce stereotypes about blacks. These stereotypes work in two ways: they ensure the persistence of a kind of social inequity that negatively impacts blacks—and are also evidence of this mindset.

We must deal with this intolerance, prejudice, and discrimination with regard to differences before we try to move towards integration. If we don't, as has been the case up until now, any attempts we make will be false. It is a tough, difficult, abrupt road. The results we want cannot be achieved via carnivalesque, buffoon-like, superficial protests or performances. What's more, we must take into account the dissimilar criteria of those affected by discrimination. The Cuban case is even more complicated. We are talking about a society with no spaces that are naturally free (not economically, not politically, not regarding thought). Even the country's extremely complex cultural-religious panorama manages to stay under control. Everything is presented as unique and exclusively singular. It is difficult for the rest of the population to achieve even a little bit within a space that by rights, and hypothetically, belongs to everyone but, in fact, is monopolized by a white, patriarchal, homophobic, discriminatory, and fundamentalist power elite. It continues to be controlled by this elite, despite the oft repeated, nineteenth-century, national, *criollo*-white creed that says the country belongs to each and every one of us.

In this scenario, it is extremely hard to act for one's own sake—to empower one's self. In fact, it is practically impossible. But we should not make the mistake of thinking it improbable. What we do have to clearly keep in mind is that the price of our realization is very high; it always has been, and

still is right now. Let us consult those who have gone down this road before us, and have been successful, despite the fact there are few of them on the island. The generation of scholars like Carlos Moore and Juan Benemelis; like recently deceased and too soon forgotten Leyda Oquendo; like actress Elvira Cervera, journalist Enrique Patterson, and artist and essayist Victoria Ruiz-Labrit, among others, all know and understand what I am talking about here. Many others who are part of the Hip Hop movement also understand. We who were born after 1959, like the aforementioned group of black intellectuals and artists, who are involved in Cuba's ethno-racial situation, seem to be the only ones who have not automatically declared ourselves as opposers of our racist reality, and as people who are committed, at least, to making known what is happening in Cuban society.

Color Cubano deserves to be looked at on its own. It is a project of the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC) and has the Communist Party's support. The *Cofradía de la Negritud* [Brotherhood of Blackness], with its somewhat ambiguous positions, has been around for 10 years inviting multi-generational artists and intellectuals who are dissatisfied with how the government has dealt with the race issue to speak with them. The *Movimiento de Integración Juan Gualberto Gómez* [Juan Gualberto Góme Integration Movement], and the *Comité Ciudadano de Integración Racial* [Citizens' Committee for Racial Integration], both of which openly oppose the government's regime, and the latter of which claims to want to collaborate with anyone who is interested in the fight against racism and for integration, equally project themselves in favor of reconstructing race relations on the island.

What are the current possibilities for empowerment?

Cuba remains far from what's going on relative to sociopolitical positioning in Brazil, Colombia, or Panamá, for example. There is no ministry in Cuba to deal with the matter, nor is the topic of concern to any of the existing ministries. Communal work is not spontaneous but rather directed. Projects that are chosen for completion must be sponsored by an official institution, which means that neighborhood folks who are interested in a particular project can do very little. Self-employment, private work, that is, is not only barely encouraged, but is not encouraged at all. It requires start-up capital and, perhaps, even a physical space, which are extremely hard for blacks, who are often living in precarious conditions, to come by. This explains why there are very few self-employed blacks: taxi drivers; owners of *paladares* [home dining rooms], restaurants, rentable rooms, hair stylists, etc. Scholarly research on the topic is still scarce, its impact negligible. Even so, it is starting to attract manipulators and diplo-intellectuals more so than academics. It is also becoming fashionable, which is always risky, and one can see this in self-motivated and desperate attempts to monopolize it through certain racially motivated versions of history, and the much too overused conceptualization of it.

We must be very careful. Not everything that seems or is tagged as Afro, necessarily is; it doesn't always originate in those communities, nor does it always benefit them. They are often totally artificial creations. Some of these very hasty and almost clandestine efforts do not necessarily help or bring good to the black and *mestizo* population. Any attempt to have a discussion comes off as more or less controlled. They occur among

elites who don't even always consider the needs or ideas of those who are the most affected. It is quite difficult and uncomfortable to try to introduce or even have criteria different than the usual considered, particularly if one is not a member of the select group of people chosen by officialdom to (truly or seemingly) promote the discussion.

The creation of the *Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba* [Cuban Yoruba Cultural Association] has not generally been a good thing for the Afro religious population, nor specifically for blacks and mulattoes. This is in a society where it is so complicated and almost impossible to get access to the web. Blogs on the subject have a minimal internal impact. The Oní de Ifé's visit to Cuba, as one of Africa's political and cultural personalities, does not necessarily benefit the black and *mestizo* part of the population very much. Neither the visits from African-American officials, at least not directly, in any event. The accomplishments of the Afro-Cuban diaspora are unknown, as are the majority of its greatest representatives. This automatically slows down or sets back any challenge to inter- and intra-racial problems. Because they are unaccustomed to acting as [fully endowed] citizens, Cubans rarely demand their rights, which describes our behavior as blacks and mulattoes. There are no laws that apply directly to our needs or help us when our rights are violated, yet the law is applied severely when we transgress current law, because our courts are also racist, as Cuban lawyers fully acknowledge.

As happens in other parts of the world, Havana, the capital of the republic, has traditionally stood for Cuba. It is the island's busiest and most important seaport. The media, for example, ignore the interests of those born elsewhere in Cuba. Something we anti-racist scholars, artists, and activists

should commit ourselves to doing is looking at the problem outside of Havana. There is ethno-racial asymmetry all over the island. The black and mulatto populations in these rural areas may be living in conditions worse than those in the capital. These people may have less hope or fewer expectations, and be practically ignorant of the fact that there are others committed to publicizing the race problem; recovering their history; promoting it through art; and establishing contact with the African Diaspora. They may be unaware of the fact that there are people who are working towards solutions that do not impose distinctions that violate the integrity of the Afro-Cuban population on Cuba's black and *mestizo* populace, and on the Cuban nation as a whole. Young people living in these lesser known corners of Cuba have a diminished chance to make something of themselves, and it is non-whites who are more likely to be apathetic, because they don't see anyone thinking that they, themselves, are important. They have fewer positive role models to look to and take their examples from while choosing a direction for their lives. Their environment is conducive to low self-esteem: they are more likely to reproduce negative patterns of behavior.

Young and old alike find it easier and more practical to be conformists. An ancient Mambí woman from Cuba's eastern mountains, who secretly helped Fidel Castro and other combatants in their guerrilla war, says "Yes. I feel discriminated against. But my children have been able to study, my daughter is a doctor, and this would not have been possible with the other government, so I just keep quiet." One hears comments like these a lot. They point to the fact that people have too long been willing to adopt a conformist attitude, which translates exactly into "fighting and running" for the whole population,

particularly for blacks and mulattoes. One young black intellectual who is tangled up in a relationship with a foreign woman in whom he has no interest, states, "There is no other way for us." Fully aware of the fact he is a racialized object for her, he chose to leave the country with her to help his own and his family's economic situation.

These are just some examples of the contradictory reality to which black and mulatto Cubans are subjected, even now. They elucidate the kinds of stereotypes that a society whose power structure cannot even show itself, except to applaud, flatter, and mimic, has imposed on them. In the best of cases, Afro-Cubans continue to be held back by this society as second-class players. Others are marginalized to an extreme that forces them to enact criminal behavior just to procure bare necessities, which then allows the system to lock them away in one of the many prisons where panoptic control mechanisms that are employed on all of society are refined.

Education, stereotypes, and raciality

Demanding messages directed at the black and mulatto population must be very precise and clear. They must not be ambiguous, and should be emitted by people with a coherent lifestyle, and for whom it is truly possible to achieve legitimacy as fighters against racism. That does not mean this process should not consider and include everyone. But it is imperative to define what points are of greatest interest.

It also doesn't mean that one has to be black or *mestizo*, that one has to have dreadlocks or any other kind of Afro hairdo, or that one has to wear supposedly African-style clothing, which would only end up looking like costumes or false representations. We

are, after all, not Africans. We are part of a new group of peoples from Indo-Afro-Latin America. Neither does this mean that both a couple and their children have to be black, but it would be totally incongruent if the couple displayed anti-black or any other discriminatory kind of behavior, or (mis)educated its offspring to discriminate.

Despite the fact we have been taught that the black population is prosaic, lazy, and vulgar, an idea that is reproduced in our collective imaginary and to which we ascribe even a hereditary, genetic explanation, this idea is entirely unreasonable, from any possible point of view. The fact that some black and mulatto intellectuals, artists, and professionals that purposely or inadvertently represent their ethno-racial group deliberately acting in a vulgar manner only serves to reinforce the negative views the earlier colonizers held; and the current, purportedly, socialist republic manages to reproduce its their thinking. Another stereotype we need to do away with is the idea that the educational models from which to learn good manners—not the false kind, with superior airs—but the sort that facilitates communication, regardless of whether one has access to space or multiple generations, are not the exclusive province of any particular ethno-racial group. Instead, these models correspond to behavioral codes known and legitimized by the communities that adopt them. Save some particularities, these codes tend to be universal.

No one can teach what he or she has never been allowed to know or learn. This explains why it seems questionable that many of the community projects initiated in what are now called ‘differently privileged neighborhoods’ (a euphemism with which the government attempts to hide the exclusion that typifies poor, impoverished neighborhoods)

insist on limiting what they teach younger generations to only folkloric dances with drums, almost to the exclusion of other forms—as if they were the only option available to them. These are neighborhoods where most residents are black and *mestizo*; the project coordinators, however, are educated, and culturally and artistically savvy. It is not the case that these people don’t know the constitutive elements of their cultures and religions, but rather that they should be offered other alternatives, and helped to know what the wide variety of options they have are, so that they can freely choose for themselves. There is full intentionality at play in the tendency to hold up young black boys and girls as examples, only to compare their way of expressing themselves to that of boxers. One should stop and wonder why they are not taught to express themselves properly; it cannot be a coincidence that most of them don’t know how to act. Someone like classical dancer Carlos Acosta, who is currently one of world’s best, is never held up to the them as a model. He would be a wonderful example of rigorous hard work, and someone to whom speaking comes easily. He is a model of simplicity with regard to his public image, and is never cheeky. Acosta can also be seen as someone who knew how to use his great talent, and was willing to make the necessary sacrifices, and practice the rigor, discipline, and drive to get ahead and get to the top. We must equally acknowledge that he had the support of people who saw his color as only one non-essential attribute, and who were in a position to help him on his way, so he could show his worth.

Our black and *mestizo* youth need many more examples like Carlos Acosta. They desperately need positive role models that look like them who have overcome the barriers that have kept them in fields that have been

traditionally acceptable: sports, military service, policing, and what is ineptly called popular culture. Most of what they see is the media representing them almost exclusively in a negative fashion, and visitor guides “promoting” them as possible objects of desire for white Europeans given to sexual tourism. None of this contributes to the construction of a positive self-image, or helps build self-esteem.



Cuban Rap: *Los Aldeanos*

The kind of music that interests young people on the radio, television, and live concerts—now fundamentally reggaeton and rap—hardly has the most positive, committed position on the struggle against racism. There are still stylists at hair salons who are totally ignorant of how to specifically deal with black or *mestizo* people who don’t want to straighten their hair. Black children are still victims of discrimination at school, and even though it is more or less subtle, the effect of it is just as devastating—and there is no way to say much of anything about it directly.

The teacher who lowers a grade and cuts short someone’s future potential, his or her possible important contribution to the group; the boss who squelches someone’s professional realization; the mocking and sardonically sardonic neighbor; the TV executive who generally casts black actors, and the black population as a whole, in minimizing positions; the police officer who harasses and mistreats; and the judge who applies the law more strictly—and this only on account of the amount of melanine in someone’s skin—frequently all do so, for no reason whatsoever. Furthermore, their deeds go unpunished. They already know that will be the case because they are sheltered by a society that structurally recreates anti-black racism. Despite the creation of the commission to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Independent Party of Color, the government shows no sensitivity or real interest in deconstructing this racialized framework.

Racism: the long road towards its deconstruction

Those of us who are somehow working against this framework should be very careful, lest we end up adopting and promoting the very same vices as the racists, or using the excessive flashiness that plagues our society. We should not allow ourselves to be excluded. We are a part of this country and have the right to be acknowledged without being pigeonholed. These categories are only an atrophied relic that should have disappeared. This is basic. We are not a theme park to be used as an example for those outside of Cuba; now that it is fashionable in some international circles to say one is fighting on behalf of the marginalized and all kinds of excluded peoples, while using them as just one more

source of business. The black and *mestizo* population in Cuba is not a minority, so we should leave aside the temptation to be considered one just because some benefit, like attracting international attention, might come of it.

We should avoid the temptation of having one-sided conversations. There is no reason for them to all be the same. Their value might rest precisely in their diversity. We should be very clear about the fact that we need to accept them all as complementing each other, despite the differences among them, and the many contradictions in them. That way we will not be doing the same thing as the official or legal conversations that continue to explain that “racism is the legacy of colonialism and capitalism” and that it will take “patience” to eradicate it. Racism was the mechanism of control and domination of a specific, historical social apparatus, but its

strength and usefulness allow it to be employed by the political structure that came after it. This explains its persistent staying power. Racism penetrates almost all possible spheres at a macro and microsocial level. It is perniciously self-feeding, because its content is essentially anti-human and without regard for who or what institution reproduces it. It is unimportant if its application and transmission is purposeful or inadvertent. It is no small problem nor can facing it be put off. Far from slowing down, it progresses, like any other disease, till it undermines the entire social body. Our answer to this at any level possible, everyday and whenever possible, must be to oppose it, lest those of us who see ourselves as anti-racists—regardless of our skin color or phenotype—work from within the stereotypes that keep being imposed on the black and *mestizo* population.