

# The Shackles of Gratitude

Víctor Manuel Domínguez  
Journalist  
Havana, Cuba

Revolutionary Cuba has not eradicated the ideological underpinnings of slavery. The shackles of gratitude crack like a whip on the backs of Cuban blacks, keeping them marginalized or paralyzed them in their search for full equality.

Any time a member of that race grumbles about his personal situation, complains, accuses, or even suggests that he is more disadvantaged than the rest, the litany that forever rings in his ears is: “Black man, don’t complain. Thanks to the Revolution you are a person.”

Everyone knows that people of color have fewer options when seeking employment in the emerging tourist industry or with corporations having ties to foreign investment; that they have the lowest paying jobs; often live in the worst neighborhoods; and constitute the majority of the country’s prison population. Few [white] Cubans acknowledge their right to exist. One common Cuban expression aptly describes the situation between the island’s whites and blacks—they are “together but not mixed up.”

The authorities do what they can to obfuscate this reality. Racism is a taboo subject in Cuba. Only groups and institutions with a minimal, insignificant number of black members can discuss the topic in very general terms. In their ridiculous role as

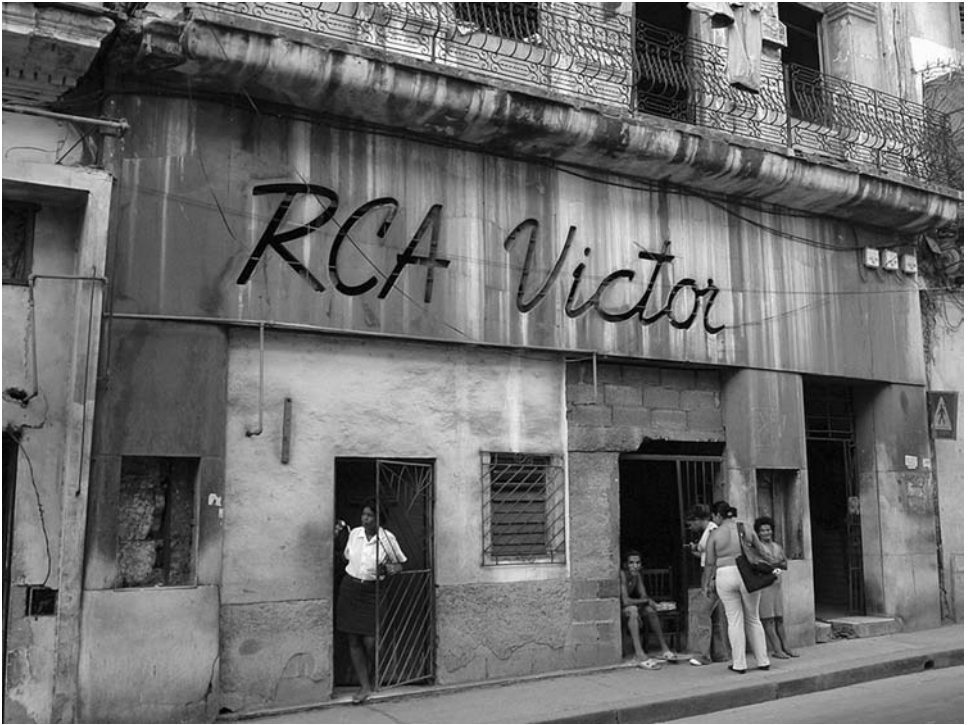
Cuban-accented Uncle Toms, they fight their equals over a piece of bread, an apartment in El Vedado, or a trip abroad—just a few of the rewards for their servile attitude.

Florida-based, Cuban intellectual Enrique Patterson accurately summed up this concept in an article published in the digital journal *Cubaencuentro*: “The government’s acknowledgement of its failure in dealing with Cuba’s racist and discriminatory tradition—however cursory and tangential—is indicative of how difficult it finds it to continue denying the existence of this plague in the very core of the socialist regime.”

Furthermore, if it is the case that blacks in Cuba are not doing well in the area of rights and accomplishments (despite the degree to which they have been and are an “integral” part of the Revolution), the situation of those who protest the official ideology of its leaders is much worse.

According to these hardcore, armchair, by-the-book communist leaders, a black man can be lazy, combative, a thief and even an ingrate or homosexual—but he can never be a counterrevolutionary.

This idea, borne of a Revolutionary doctrine that supposedly bestowed humanity on the black race, is nothing but an obvious throwback to the very core of slavery, the slave trade, and the physical and social



lynching of black people solely because of their pigmentation.

The Cuban Revolution knows it has an enormous, unpayable debt to pay to its black citizens, not only because of their undeniable contribution to the nation's identity, culture, and society but also because they are a human group with as much or perhaps even more potential than its white "governing body."

Just because a few semi-hidden and slightly imbibed folks were able to sit around in the gardens of the National Union of Cuban Artists and Writers, drinking strong, "Mulata" rum-laced *mojitos* while talking about 'Cuban color' does not mean that there is much concern about Cuba's race problem, much less about equality.

Allowing a black man to play a leading television role as a psychologist after so

many years of him being an extra, servant, slave, bootblack, boxer or trucker does not prove that racism has been driven from Cuba's audiovisual media. The problem is not circumstantial and cannot be resolved by means of humiliating measures, quick fixes, or actions that do not actually acknowledge the problem.

A new way of thinking is essential for Cuba. Communicative bridges must be built. People of color must be permitted to make their contribution, to realize themselves, to share their talent on truly equal footing—and not just by constitutional fiat.

The shackles of gratitude are an affront to Cuba's people of color. More than just black, they are humans fully capable of taking on any challenge and totally overcoming it. Access is really all they need.