

Recurring Racism

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A few nights ago, as I rode the bus home, I amused myself by counting how many blacks and mestizos were riding in the rain to their destinations along with me. Not counting the driver or the fare-taker, I came up with an estimate of ninety-five percent. I then asked myself why the Cuban government's demographic data estimates that whites constitute a majority of the island's population.

Around the same time, I read an article titled "Los negros en Cuba" [Blacks in Cuba] published on *CUBANET's* webpage.¹ In it, a young black woman from Havana complains of being victimized by a racism that just refuses to go away. She is a recent law school graduate and lives in a poor and marginal neighborhood south of a Havana suburb.

The author reflects upon the personal suffering she has had to endure because of her black skin. The fact that she bases her own characterization of herself on negative values indicates that her own self-perception is couched in an attitude of reverse racism. The complexity of her physical self-evaluation reveals even her desire to change her image, and that she prefers the white phenotype.

The latest human genome research demonstrates that there is no genetic differ-

ence between a man and woman from Africa and their fellow Europeans. The reader might agree with me that Europeans were the ones who disseminated the idea of black during the nineteenth century, when it was common to classify all of nature's creations, and this tactic was used to justify the enslavement of the African labor force that was utilized in the plantation system.

Recurring racism is also responsible for the author's feelings of victimization. A distorted view of human categories was transplanted to colonial Latin America, where anti-indigenous and anti-black racism constituted the fundamental ideological pillars of colonialism and the primary justification for keeping millions of Africans and indigenous people enslaved.

Despite the fact slavery was abolished in Cuba little over a century ago, its inherited discursive logic still flourishes today. It can be found in the low self-esteem blacks have of themselves, due to persistent negative perceptions such as the stigma that comes with their skin color, hair quality, thick lips, broad noses and oily skin.

Many groups and large numbers of blacks and mestizos in Cuba also continue believing that their skin color makes it impossible for them to escape their terrible



Cuban “camel” bus. Mass transit vehicle

economic situation. This feeling, a direct consequence of social inequalities that became exacerbated during the economic crisis of the nineties, is quite evident in the abovementioned article by the twenty-something year old young woman whose life experience has been limited to a geographically and economically marginalized neighborhood.

We hear blacks and mestizos parroting a discourse of self-flagellation and fatalism that does little more than to confirm their own uncertainties and their own lack of effort in attempting to achieve a positive stance. They lack a vision for a future in which their individuality and differences could be brought to bear—if they exist—and instead adhere to patterns of behavior that are often anti-social—a consequence of their erroneous search for authenticity.

The lack of systematic studies to research the actual causes of social relegation or marginalization in Cuba accentuate the Cuban blacks and mestizos’ lack of determination or willfulness to escape this vicious circle of marginality. It is hard for them to take charge of their own, perhaps different world, even though this would improve their intellectual and material conditions.

One of the reasons for this low self-esteem—in Cuba, at least—rests in the fact that the place of blacks in Cuban ‘history’ or the ‘national narrative’ was so diluted in favor of a monochromatic nationalism that their undeniable contributions in certain areas have been seriously downplayed. For example, has anyone seriously propagated, researched, and analyzed the role of certain blacks and mestizos in history, a role that would instill pride in anyone at all? Has anyone done so with the role of the black press at

the late 19th, early 20th turn of the century? Has anyone evaluated the role that black and mestizo organizations played in Cuban history since the nineteenth century and till they were disbanded in the 1960s?

For the time being, the answer is ‘no.’ Only the figures of Maceo and Juan Gualberto Gómez receive much attention as great patriots. That is all. How many black and mestizo generals, brigadiers and colonels were there among the ranks of the Mambi soldiers? They certainly did a great deal to raise the status and “pride of being black in Cuba,” but even our national history has been whitewashed over the years. But for what purpose, one might ask?

Cuban blacks and mestizos today are not targets for disdain, indifference or hate, as the author of the earlier cited article alleges. Even if one must acknowledge some reticence on the part of the government to eliminate the racial inequality that persists, it is also true that these became increasingly obvious during the exacerbating nineties, when certain discriminatory attitudes remaining in the minds of some reemerged. But one could never say that these attitudes were or are an actual widespread social trend.

There is a new and growing trend towards interracial social relationships in Cuba. This is quantifiable in marriages and friendships above all. The increase in the number of practitioners of Cuba’s syncretic religions also points to a new valorization of African heritage at the personal and family levels. One sees an ever-increasing number of people, mostly young folks, wearing shell necklaces and bracelets with which they identify themselves with deities from the African pantheon.

Although the weight of the Yoruba, Bantu, and Arará cultures is obvious in Cuban syncretism, the actual results reflect

their transculturation, mixing, and transformation into “Cubanness”—a true synthesis of the contributions of Cuban ethnic groups.

Furthermore, it is not appropriate to denominate black Cubans as “African descendants” or “Afro-Cubans.” These monikers imply that we should also be calling white Cubans “Spanish descendants.” It is a mistake because the racial purity of one person or another cannot be determined. To back off or give up on the project of miscegenation in Cuba, an absolutely crucial process in the formation of the Cuban population, would also be a grave error in our struggle to situate ourselves as black Cubans in the midst of a true and effective reevaluation of our position. We do not need foreign frockcoats made to fit any reality but our own.

Racism in the United States is nothing like racism on the island. Economic and not racial differences are what most distinguish people in Cuba. In addition, Cuban society did not evolve into separate white or black racial spaces. Institutionalized education and the acknowledgement of each individual’s positive worth and possibilities often undo the Gordian contradictions of some of these surviving racist practices.

The critical problems that plague Cuban society are not racial but political in nature. They affect whites, blacks and mestizos equally. Respect for individual rights, especially the right to self-determination, is absolutely crucial to our being able to find the ideal path towards material and spiritual improvement. It might also be one of the ways to slowly eradicate recurring racism from our society.

Note:

1. See “Blacks in Cuba” in this issue of *ISLAS*.