

Where are the Black People?*

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They say that there is no racism in Cuba. Socialism eliminated it with one blow. It's a solved problem. It's another accomplishment of the revolution. There is no argument about it. There's even less doubt about it among white Cubans. The dirt, which was racism, was swept with great care under the rug in one swing of the broom. Since our country's independence, we Cubans have stubbornly refused to accept that racial problems exist on the Island.

In 1912, almost 3,000 blacks were massacred and their deaths wound up hidden under the rug where the cadaver of a mambi general named Quintin Banderas, who coincidentally was black, had already been hidden. In a blackmail scheme that somebody imposed on Fulgencio Batista to veto his admission to the Miramar Yacht Club, his skin color weighed more heavily than his social status and his legitimacy as president de facto. Further, the reddish skin of the false Messiah that overthrew Batista was considered a blessing from heaven to the native Cuban bourgeois.

Once the revolution triumphed, segregated exclusive beaches and hotels were done away with. Nicolas Guillén sang about this in his poem called I Have (Tengo):

I have, let's see
That being a black man
No one can stop me
At the door of a "dancing" or a bar.

In the first years, it was inconceivable for a black man to oppose Cuba's revolutionary regiment. How could such an abomination be possible? The revolution had "brought down blacks from the trees and cut off their tails." Just as you hear it, this phrase, both paternally cruel and intrinsically racist, was repeated excessively. No one knew who coined it, but certainly, not the Commander-in-Chief. Nevertheless, the anonymity of the originator did not prevent it from being repeated, as if there were no options for blacks that were not based on the Marxist-Leninism philosophy.

Shall I tell you the truth? Racial discrimination has not ended in Cuba. Ask the black people who live there if you do not believe me. Racism has always been tied to the Cuban way of life, like a bad weed well rooted in prejudices and created through common stereotypes of the collective imagination.

Black people are only thought to be good for music and sports. Aside from that, look for them at parties, in drunkenness and squabbles. They are lazy, scandalous, incompetent, and thieves. But, they had to be good at something besides sports and music. There is an entire sexual mythology regarding them. For example, black women are labeled hot and black men are labeled uncontrolled erotic athletes.

I include a small bite from the famous movie Strawberry and Chocolate (Fresa y Chocolate) that should not go to waste. Diego, the gay lead actor, says to David while listening to Maria Callas (an opera diva), and drinking Hindu tea from porcelain teacups that used to belong to the Loynaz del Castillo family:

"Me, racist? Boy! I know the value of a black person very well. But they are not good to drink tea with. It's a shame. You

blink and zoom, the black person is gone with the Cebres porcelain.”

Elements of African origin have been turned into symbols of nationality, particularly in music, dances, slang, and syncretic cults. Cultural big shots have discovered a goldmine. In the past, blacks were little more than folklore and witchcraft in their view. Now, the big shots have turned them into baits to attract tourists. They hope that the tourists’ foreign dollars will save Cuba’s communism. For this reason, the big shots invented the “diplobalao,” (Santeria priests, who serve foreigners in exchange for foreign currency), Santeria necklaces without “ache” (without spiritual power or blessing) and the false letter of the year from the Yoruba Cultural Association.

According to official census numbers, blacks and mulattos comprise 63 percent of Cuba’s total population. However, the percentage of non-whites could be higher because Cubans are allowed to choose their race category for the national population census. Residents who do not have pronounced black features tend to declare themselves as white. The variegated Cuban crossbreeding creates an intermediate category of people who are not white or black; they can “pass as white.” Their neutralized racial identity promotes racial discrimination at the same time that denies its existence.

In the tourism side of Cuba, aside from the stage and dance floor, one can only wonder, where are the blacks? Do not search for them in positions linked to tourism or corporations that have foreign capital. A “good presence” is required in them, apparently, similar to that of Hollywood patrons in the 1940’s.

Neither are blacks in the high spheres of power. For instance, 85 percent of the members of the Political Bureau are white. You

can count on one hand the number of blacks and mulattos amongst the remaining leaders of the State and sole political party. These blacks are the exceptions to the rule. Further, blacks rarely have lead roles in the movies and television. The slave roles are usually reserved for them. However, they are the majority of the penal population in the more than 200 prisons scattered throughout the country.

Historically, it has been an aberrant vicious cycle. Blacks have been reduced in importance. They have been denied opportunities. The survival strategies of the most unfortunate have been interpreted as additional proof of their inferiority and created the axiom of their supposed propensity toward delinquency. Blacks attract the suspicion of the police. They are the main victims of busts and operatives of the PNR (the National Revolutionary Police). “It’s as if there are no white prostitutes (“jineteras”). As if whites do not steal or smoke marijuana.” This statement was made by desolated Rasta friend of mine from Mantilla who has opted to stay home and listen to reggae. He knows of the public searches, of dungeons and danger acts.

Do not speak to whites (or those who appear to be) of racial discrimination in Cuba. It will make them feel uncomfortable. They will say that racism is not a problem. There will always be somebody who will tell you that speaking of that will only benefit the imperialist enemy. If to want you know, walk the Havana streets. Do it without preconceived ideas or airs of third world solidarity. Sit on the corners, go into the lots, and maybe then you will discover where the black people are.

NOTES

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