

Color and Uncertainly

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It was another place populated by blacks and mestizos. Of the two thousand men, more than ninety percent belonged to the forgotten race; the same inhabitants of the uninhabitable cellblocks who carried out the crudest, worst paid and most dangerous jobs. These are people who are considered perverse, anti-aesthetic and torpe. A majority of them, there, at the margins of existence, with no other option but instincts brought out by hunger, mistreatment and scientific abandon.

They are all like guests at the Guantanamo jail, just on the other side of the prison where the U.S. Army keeps several dozen alleged terrorists confined. I was part of that population, not for being black, but for exercising my right to free speech, for bounding beyond the barrier of edicts, for ignoring the censors' and commissioners' rules.

I should have remained silent, acquiesce, as blacks are asked to do in Cuba, to show gratefulness to those who proclaim themselves to be our emancipators. There was no room for forgiveness. I violated the pact: with my Remington typewriter

almost as old as my mother, blank pages and my decision to put upon them my thoughts, I rebelled.

My ideologically motivated abhorrence took on more importance. As a child of an "adelantado" ("advanced," light-skinned) mestizo father, and a slightly more pigmented mother, my skin color was light, my nose flat and my hair stiff. To some, I was a mulatto; to others I was black.

The prosecutor and accusers (all white), dressed in military attire, could not hide their excessive hate when I was permitted the right to explain myself at one point in the trial. Of the four accused independent journalists, I was the only black.

Through my fear, the few words I was able to articulate were serene, but could be taken as a response. Perhaps my tone as I spoke, my ethnic origin, and the Stalinist setting all combined to make my sentence tougher. The charge merited a fifteen-year stint: it finally ended up being an eighteen-year sentence, with me being sent to the extreme eastern part of the Island, to Guantanamo, of all places, which is more

than 900 kilometers from the City of Havana, my place of residence for 46 years.

If not for the language difference, any observer not familiar with Cuban affairs might think that the Combinado Provincial in Guantánamo is a South African prison under the old regime. Blacks everywhere, sleeping on the floor, involved in deadly scraps, repeatedly attempting suicide, nourished like hogs.

That is the other home of Cuban blacks. From the unpainted, hardly furnished room with cracks in the ceilings and walls, with multigenerational populations coexisting within it, to one of the more than 200 prisons and work camps that exist in Cuba today. It is a journey that many take repeatedly throughout the whole island.

The prison population is primarily black and mulatto. According to independent researchers, about 70,000 men of color are behind bars. This means that no less than eighty percent of prisoners belong to this racial group. Hostility towards those who have dark skin or some feature that reveals any African heritage is a common, daily occurrence. Police activity on the street victimizes more blacks than anyone else. Darker skin color is concomitant with the depth or intensity of discriminatory behaviors. A mestizo has more access to work than his darker skinned brethren, although that does not mean he will not suffer rejection, in its multiple manifestations.

Degrees of blackness and ugliness are unalterable taboos for successful integration into emerging economic sectors like tourism, where salary possibilities are better. There are exceptions, but the key is to nix the aspirations of the darker population in order to have access to important

employment or positions in companies and public institutions. Blacks are excluded from hotel management, broadcast journalism, high-level political and military positions, and leading roles in films. They are cooks, stewards, stock boys, and janitors. Black women are hardly found in television programming, particularly journalists. Black men appear only occasionally. Those who do work in the TV news media do so only at sign off time, when there is very little audience. In the cinema, blacks play mostly slaves or criminals, and are almost always the ones who imbue common, slipshod, uncultivated, and rollicking, almost paradoxical characters with believability.

It is not that there are no blacks that possess those characteristics. What is insidious about this is that the reiteration of the stereotype implies racial differences and the supposed superiority of white men. Why is the real history of blacks in Cuba deliberately omitted, minimized or lampooned through propagandistic clichés?

If one follows the current regime, which has been in power for nearly half a century, with regards to the participation and integration of blacks, one can conclude that this sector has suffered an ostensible decline both in quality of life and social acceptability. Little room has been made for blacks in music, sports and dance, particularly folkloric dance. This has nothing to do with special incentives; success has everything to do with an individual's talent and personal effort. These are realities manipulated by the 'establishment' to maintain the popular illusion that the "socialist" revolution rescued blacks from abandon and abject poverty.

Prior to 1959, blacks in Cuba experienced a certain degree of segregation, but

nothing like the racism that prevailed at the same time in a large part of the United States. The colonial past, when blacks were like beasts of burden, affected their assimilation into a society largely shaped by descendents of Spaniards who definitively imposed cultural mores and values inherited from their slave-owning fathers, who in thought and/or practice saw blacks as inferior beings.

Despite its origins, the black segment of the population left its mark on the national identity. Martín Morúa Delgado tenaciously managed to preside over the Senate during the first decade of the twentieth century, working against diverse, enormous obstacles. Juan Gualberto Gómez, before him, was a principal player in the war for independence, with José Martí. History recounts the achievements of Brindis de Salas, Beny Moré and Dámaso Pérez Prado, just three musical stars from an innumerable constellation that fascinated whites and blacks with their eternal melodies.

In a general sense, one could not say that blacks were content, or that they all had the chance to create an existence at least a notch above poverty and rejection. But, they did not live a reality such as the one those currently in power tend to project. I say this because of my own family. My maternal grandmother, a black, illiterate domestic, was the one who taught me good manners, respect for adults, and proper table manners, too. My grandfather, a handicapped cigarmaker with little education, turned out to be a paradigm of goodness, honest work, love of family, a tendency towards generosity with those less fortunate than himself, and a love of empirical knowledge. With his wise, lengthy dissertations on almost any subject, it was as if he



were a teacher by profession. His incredible love of reading made it possible for him to reject ignorance.

“We never went to bed hungry, no matter how bad things were,” my lucid, nearly ninety-year old, no nonsense grandmother would tell me. Sweet potato, milk, corn meal, and salted meat—an unobtainable delicacy for many Cuban families right now in the twenty-first century—was the menu during times of economic hardship during the early 1930s, when the iron-fisted Gerardo Machado ruled.

The arrival of the revolutionary process brought with it promises of redemption for the black race—that is, it promised blacks equality and the possibility of erasing the traces of prejudice—goals that resulted to be far too ambitious.

Many black families experienced a qualitative improvement in their lifestyles.

They got to have refrigerators and televisions, and a degree of purchasing power that did not surpass that of white families, but nonetheless permitted them the ability to procure a normal amount of foodstuffs and services.

Soviet subsidies oiled the populist machinery and the topic of race became secondary in its importance. Most of the black population became caught in the trap. In exchange for a pre-calculated opening of the door to limited intellectual and economic development for blacks, they were made to believe that they had achieved lifetime wellbeing and security.

Blacks became the pillars of incipient totalitarianism, the weapons used to incriminate and accuse the middle and high classes that had discriminated against them for so many decades.

The effects of sustained media campaigns and the generational transmission of the peregrine notion that insists upon seeing the new racists in power as the benefactors of blacks are still evident. That is why so many today's *porristas* [security henchmen] are of African descent, a reality that will increase confusion and create quotas in the trauma so-called people of color will experience when an eventual transition to democracy takes place.

Extraterritorial gains

Efforts to create a transnational, black support network have paid off very well. There are many subscribers in Africa, former guerrilla leaders who have become locally and internationally relevant politicians, artists and prominent religious figures, among others, who offer praises and all kinds of diplomatic assistance to Havana. This keeps Cuba from being con-

demned and recriminated in international gatherings such as the United Nation's General Assembly and the Council on Human Rights.

On the black continent, the apparatus that moves ideological workings based on nationalism and the criminalization of multiple points of view has eager workers who think nothing of using their positions to save the "prestige" of a country that gives them endless handouts. Thousands of doctors, sports trainers, military advisors and specialists have traversed the jungles of Gambia, the forests of Togo, the plains of Zimbabwe and the wilds of Lesotho. Journeys throughout Africa are constant, a sort of safari in which the prize game is a tacit commitment to comply with all of Bwana's requests.

This transaction is subtle, almost impossible to denounce, due to its humanitarian nature. Nelson Mandela, Sam Nujoma, José Eduardo Dos Santos, and Robert Mugabe are all faithful to the Cuban dictatorship. They do not forget the help they received during the war against colonialism and its backers. Thousands of young Cubans died in Algeria, Ethiopia and Angola. Black Cubans played a particularly significant role in Angola, the supposed explanation being that they were used to confuse the South African army about the Angolan or Antillean origin of the enemy before them. Of course, countless black families in Cuba had to go into mourning.

It is possible that none of the above-mentioned personalities is aware of the hidden misery of their black brothers in Cuba. They might even think that any negativity regarding their existence is simply a strategy meant to discredit the government. It is impossible to ignore the fact that with

their creation of a rear guard faithful to and friendly with the leaders of the lone party that governs Cuba, like a feudal plantation, they are manifesting their complicity with it, or at least their hatred of the United States.

The collusion of a segment of the African-American population with the political and cultural elite of the Island is an extension of that black solidarity. This affinity can be seen in the actions of important international stars like Danny Glover and Harry Belafonte, two more individuals whose voices fortify Island allegations against U.S. democratic structures, but who remain blind to the dilemma of the majority of the black and mestizo population in the Cuban interior. They believe the pro-government praises of eminent pianist Chucho Valdés and the compromised philosophical rhetoric of the poet laureate Nancy Morejón, a couple of renowned and talented artists who are, nevertheless, loathe to stand and take notice of the reality suffered by hundreds of thousands of people with their very same skin pigmentation. These are people who are relegated to the periphery and abandon, and are condemned to be seen and judged as scum, to survive in cell blocks for their whole lives and made to feel as though prison were a prolongation of their destiny.

It is not odd that blacks who have been lucky enough to be able to establish some position for themselves in Cuba, by dint of their talents or collaboration with the system, feel justified in forgetting the misfortune of the rest. They want no problems. They live comfortably, travel, and publish their work. It is not my intention to generalize; that would be less than objective on my part. Notwithstanding, I should admit, lamentably, that the majority of black

intellectuals are not known for their sincerity and valor when it comes to addressing the real conditions their race endures in a country where it is estimated they constitute nearly sixty percent of the population, including those considered mestizos.

Without a doubt, black Cubans have a long way to go. Their gains were plausible during the early stages of revolutionary ardor, but dialectics have just not worked. The impasse is evident. The reason for this finds cause in the superficiality of officialdom's focus, in the primacy of the racist mentality of many of the Island's political leaders, and in the exacerbation caused by the influx of a foreign investment that prioritizes the employment of whites.

Anyone who wants to see a genuine example of the black tragedy, has only to decide to take a stroll through some areas of Old Havana, Central Havana and Marianao; three Havana neighborhoods where poverty, which is as intense as a storm, dresses in black.

Anyone who visits a prison will find a scandalous number of blacks there. I, myself, spent almost two years in one of those places. Because I would not remain silent, I criticized things I thought to be deplorable. One of them is and will continue to be racism.