

The Invisible Color

Juan González Febles
Journalist



Racism in Cuba is an aristocratic and media-related and driven phenomenon. It exists at the highest levels of political power but remains as hidden as homosexuality. Few are the black generals in the armed forces.

Few are those in the State Security police force, too. One could even say that there is a scarcity of agents representing this ethnic group. There were not enough Suzuki motorcycles for the black agents, but they are used as collaborators. One takes what one can get.

Tourism is another area in which the absence of blacks is noticeable. Foreign investors friendly with the government don't want them as employees.

The worst of it is that tourist guides are trained to tell visitors that 80% of the Cuban population is white. As of yet, no one has been able to reasonably explain this outrageous lie to me.

The Cuban government's persistent conduct is just like that of those families that used to hide their black grandmother in the back room.

Blacks are as rarely present at the higher levels of the Communist Party as they are in government positions. In a national space where everyone is doing badly, it is blacks who suffer the worst of it. Yet, national TV is where this situation becomes the most obvious.

It is in public service ads about alcohol and drug abuse that one finds blacks. Conversely, there are few blacks on the currently popular Havana soap opera “Oh La Habana.” The only one there has been till now is the alleged perpetrator of a theft at a workplace. Oh –I forgot, the actor who plays the boxer in this series is white!

While it is difficult to find a white man on any boxing team in Cuba, the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television (CIRT) found one for its soap opera.

These expressions of racism that deny black people their rightful share are the rule in the Cuban media. Such is the case with employment at high levels of the Cuban hierarchy, too.

Who will end up working in those positions is decided at employment agencies in the service of embassies, corporations, etc. It is uncommon to see black people at embassies. Some get in at those spots associated with countries in black Africa. Yet, even there, it is mestizos and whites who usually get those positions.

Cuba is a state constructed on a vertical framework. Authority comes from the highest levels and demands information and not suggestions from the lower echelons.

Todo el tiempo de los cedros [All the Cedar’s Time], by Katuska Blanco, is doubtlessly a very elucidating book about the highest levels of the political leadership in Cuba and its relationship to blacks.

It is a pleasing biographical work about Fidel and Raul Castro’s family set in their

birthplace, Birán, in the old province of Oriente.

In spite of it all, if one attentively reads this interesting biography what one finds is a very racist view of things. The worse part of it is its representation of mostly humble Jamaican and Haitian immigrants from the Antilles.

This perspective greatly influenced the authoritarian and patriarchal way the Cuban head of state has viewed black people throughout his whole life. This has had an impact on even the highest echelons of political power in Cuba.

It is no secret to anyone that members of the power elite have reserved for themselves the best residences in Havana. Their favorite residential zones are euphemistically called “frozen zones” because there are controls in force so that no unauthorized people move in.

Practically no black families reside in these preferentially located neighborhoods –Miramar, Nuevo Vedado, Atabey, Siboney, Kohly, Flores and others.

Happily, amongst the populace, racism is old history now, just water under the bridge that has no impact on daily life. Mixed marriages and extensive miscegenation give the population the look of a people united by something more than adversity.

What is crucial for all Cubans –whites and blacks– is democratic change and an irrefutable end to the leftist, totalitarian military dictatorship that oppresses everyone equally.

When that happens, we will have a republic that is truly “with all and for the good of all,” governed and protected by the rule of law. Then and only then will black people cease being invisible.