

Racism in Black and White: A Cuban Perspective

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Social rejection on account of skin color, if it is well camouflaged in the persistent Cuban *choteo*, still reveals aspects that are linked to the most rancorous prejudices brought to the island by the Spanish conquistadores.

More than five hundred years of open miscegenation between island blacks and whites, as well as the countless struggles to achieve equal rights for both races, have not been able to erase the resentment, prejudice or historical, pseudo-scientific and popular deceit that still browbeats, like racial ghosts, the complete integration of the nation.

Divided into Cuban whites, blacks and *mestizos*, although mixed by the common root of each color, we Cubans entered the twenty-first century with more shame than glory with regard to racial equality.

The constant call for the full dignity of man as well as the triumphant announcement of our irreversible accomplishments in the erasing of differences of color make impossible the culling out of the racistly rooted trees that are growing in our island's forest of institutionalized equality.

It is important to note that there is still evidence of the marginalization and disdain to which we who have black skin are subjected by people with the same skin color as our own, despite the progress made with regard to racial integration in contemporary Cuba.

To corroborate this, and short of entering into a sociological treatise from the perspective of ethnological points relevant to the subject, let us begin by briefly discussing racism in the voice of

someone who has been immersed in the muted but intense reality of racial discrimination.

Speaking 'black': Oral expression

Unlike Nicolás Guillén, who with healthy pride and despite the era's marked prejudices integrated the voice of blacks to the island's cultural concert in his poetry volume *Motivos de Son* (1930), there are not many today who do not feel shamed by or work to distance themselves from those verses, which bared the naturalness of one of our identity's roots far beyond the context in which he wrote.

If back then the poet was smashing centuries of subjugation and race-based inferiority complexes with poems like "Negro *Bembón*" —"¿Por qué te pone bravo/cuando te disen negro *bembón*/si tiene la boca santa/negro *Bembón*?" [Why you git so mad/when dey call you Blackie Fat Lips /if yo' mouf is so sacred/Blackie Fat Lips!]-, any allusion to this topic today is considered either racist or pejorative, or of a mocking or disdainful stripe.

Notwithstanding, and not on few occasions, one can hear a black person say: '¿tengo que adelantar la raza?' [I have to advance my race!] when referring to a need to have some white descendancy, presumably to lighten the skin, straighten the hair, refine the nose and, above all, inherit the supposed superiority of white manners and distinguishing features over blacks ones.

There are other forms of black-on-black racism besides the above-cited example of self-discrimination. For example, when a black per-

son couples up with a white-skinned one it is almost possible to hear a loud face slap: “‘Qué bajo es ese tipo/a. Empatarse con un/a blanco/a. ¡No es más que un/a negro/a piolo/a!’ [How low he [or she] is! ‘Imagine hooking up with a black!’ ‘He’s [she’s] nothing but a white-loving black!’].”

These are instances of the sort of inferiority complex and low self-esteem from which blacks suffer, which have affected them for centuries, negatively impacting their self-respect and their ability to garner respect from others, and making them unable to feel pride in their humanity because of their skin color. This is even truer for those who are the direct victims of a ceaseless white racism against the alleged inferiority of persons of color that sometimes comes masked in a joke.

Intellectual capacity

One of the most absurd expressions of white racism can be found in white disdain regarding the “inferior” ability of black people to learn.

An example of this that seems like a saying right out of a book of popular expressions may really just come from the conviction of the person articulating it regarding the racial superiority of blacks, as the next four lines demonstrate: “El negro lo hizo Dios/ para completar un grupo/ Pero como lo vio tan bruto/ al diablo se lo entregó” [God made the black /to fill out a complete group/ but he found him such a dupe/ that to the Devil he gave him back].

Upon hearing some white enunciating other expressions that supposedly compliment blacks, one can appreciate how the expansive power of this racist blast is enshrined and bursts in diverse expressions that show the discriminatory nature of this rude and crude kind of versification:

“Ese negro tiene alma e inteligencia de blanco. Se hizo doctor” [That black man has the soul and intelligence of a white man. He became a doctor], or “Ese negro es un mechao. Si nadie lo ve cuando está hablando, piensa que es un blanco

por la labia que se manda” [That black man is stuck up. If no one notices him when he is speaking he’s white with all that talking he does].

Another one is: “No te desgastes, negro, y corre pal’ bongó. Si fallaste en el boxeo y el béisbol, no puedes pedir más” [Don’t wear yourself out, black man, just run for the bongo. If you couldn’t make it as a boxer or baseball player, you can’t ask for more].

This kind of racially-based discrimination either through hurtful euphemisms like “El es negro, pero honrado” [He is black, but honest]; or the posturing of bleeding hearts who in their apparent goodness offend with comments like “yo quiero a los negros como si fueran iguales que nosotros” [I love blacks as if they were our equals] or “entre mis amistades a los que más aprecio son a los de color” [some of my best friends are blacks] lay bare the racist streak that still eats away at our society, despite or, perhaps, beyond the proclamations, calls, fusions and reenounters that a common ideal about a common root entails.

Yet, since it would be impossible to enumerate example of racism in contemporary Cuba from different points of view, one need only sharply see and hear the numerous ways in which the authorities try to harmonize different racial ideas via political and cultural means.

The call of the Cuarto Congreso del Partido Comunista [Fourth Congress of the Communist Party] to give blacks greater state-level administrative control as well as the “Color Cubano de la UNEAC (Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba) [Cuban Color of the UNEAC (National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba)] program, which is attempting to bring the number of blacks in the media up to that of whites, are a clear demonstration of the fact that the island’s ‘racism in black and white’ is an ongoing practice awaiting not a solution but rather a collective will to either perpetuate it or join the many Cubans who together see and denounce racial discrimination in the nation.