

Silence and its Accomplices

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Cuban authorities and their official spokespeople have recently been expressing a growing preoccupation with the extremely obvious and palpable fractures and wants that characterize the lack of representation and access that affect blacks and mestizos in contemporary Cuban society.

It is against this disquieting backdrop that an article published in the Friday, July 11, 2008 issue of *Juventud Rebelde*, titled “Romper el silencio” [Breaking the Silence], is circulating. Credit for it goes to journalist and writer Gisela Arandia, the experienced cultural promoter and director of “Color Cubano.” The project came about a decade ago, under the jurisdiction of the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC); its mission is to promote the adequate representation and participation of an extremely important segment of the population in the island’s social and cultural spaces.

The author references the historical origins and manifestations of the silences and taboos that exclusionary and hegemonic interests have imposed on the racial problem’s treatment as part of the complex web of interrelations that characterized the nation-building process in Cuba.

According to the Ms. Arandia, colonialism, traditional class and discriminatory interests, as well as the radical exile commu-

nity, mostly situated in South Florida, are responsible for the imposed silence that has attempted to exclude African Cuban descendants from the patterns and references destined to shape the national imaginary of the largest of the Antilles.

When she affirms: “the Cuban Revolution, with its emancipatory character, cannot obliterate that hidden myth,” Ms. Arandia outdoes herself in a litany of learned observations, jumbles, omissions and half-assertions that confuses current reality and even past history.

She should specify in her statement as to whether she is passing this judgment on a ‘done deal’ or if she is offering a recommendation to a political apparatus anxious to write its own history—a half century too late.

Ms. Arandia forgets that the never-ending Revolution’s first and foremost leader [Fidel Castro], as part of a hegemonic elite that knew exactly how to manipulate the Cuban people’s protracted hopes in favor of his own personal interests, particularly through his generous, radical-messianic discourse, conceded not one single word about the race problem in *La historia me absolverá* [History Will Absolve Me], an alleged account of his self-defense at the Moncada trial (1953), which served as his debut on the scene of alternative politics.

This omission was a profitable wink to those traditionally powerful and racist social sectors whose tacit or explicit support would be a determining factor in his obtaining political objectives. In contrast with the constant references made to the racially exclusionary situation in pre-revolutionary Cuba, Castro's omission is a precursor of a paternalistic and manipulative expectation that demands that blacks and mestizos be eternally loyal to those in power, in gratitude for their alleged emancipation. What this so-called liberation (from racism) actually accomplished was to almost entirely eliminate spaces in which blacks could associate and engage in civic discourse, as well as most mechanisms through which they could discuss and debate a topic of capital importance for the true completion of the still inchoate Cuban nation.

The author somehow admits that the silence surrounding the issue of race persists. She goes so far as to call it a danger for the powers that be, an absolute, indisputable force that is divorced from reality that surely insists on describing itself as a revolution, for personal motives, despite the fact it does not acknowledge responsibility for the lack of a necessary, open, pluralistic and ongoing debate. Such a debate would contribute to updating rhetoric on the topic and serve to expose those taboos and exclusionary practices that still impede in the solid, practical establishment of a long awaited situation of social equality.

Once again, Ms. Arandia falls into an easy, self-deluding trap (innocently, one would hope) that transfers to the enemy responsibility for their problems and wants: "The agenda of our long-term, counterrevolutionary enemies has always addressed this issue though silence." In response to so 'original' an assertion, it is important to state that

for those of us who view the problem from an independent and critical standpoint, that silence, primarily the effect of those who for fifty years have meticulously controlled all avenues of expression, and social and intellectual participation, is nothing more than an inherent part of the system's structure and workings. What is truly shocking to us is to see that Cuban blacks continue to be nineteenth-century style victims who keep on being sent to the frontline of war and work, but are nevertheless seen as marginal when constructed politically, institutionally or economically—despite so many years of emancipatory and egalitarian rhetoric.

When the author assures us that "it would be ridiculous to feel ashamed of an historic conflict, particularly because in doing so we would be forgetting all our accomplishments, which are many," perhaps she was thinking that the fact that discussion of the race problem has been suppressed for fifty years; that hundreds of cultural, fraternal and recreational associations have been



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disbanded; that there is an extremely high black and mestizo prison population in the country; and, the worsening impact of the imposed dollarization of society, should all be highly publicized as great achievements. Likewise the limited presence of black workers and specialists in the most promising areas of the troubled Cuban economy; the selective and prolonged political repression that darkens our lives; and, the often questioned absence of this important part of the population in cinematic, television and theatrical representations.

As if she were a distant observer, or we didn't already bear the scars of half a century of the powers that be imposing silence on us, Ms. Arandía unashamedly asserts: "This is a complex issue that cannot be kept hidden in a naïve attempt to pretend that what cannot be seen does not exist. Silence is an obstacle to any opportunity to find its pertinent solutions." The author conveniently forgets that this silence, which is so harmful to the present and future of our complex coexistence, feeds on an attitude just like her own. After ten years of assuming responsibility for publicly and institutionally confronting the problem, all Giselda Arandía has done is to create a closed, elite group of hidden and amateurish aficionados.

"Color Cubano" has focused its efforts outwardly; it has served only for its promoters to pose as liberals before certain foreign colleagues (victims of a sort of late night romanticism that keeps them from seeing things the way they really are) and to make refreshing trips to that "mixed up and brutal" North they so hate, because these pristine postmodern angels love to visit Hell.

It is of utmost importance that people like Ms. Arandía agree to subordinate their personal feelings and interests, and their rhetorical practices, and accept that if the

race problem, like all impactful and transcendental social phenomena, among which are public health, education, human values and basic rights, is not constantly questioned, it will descend unavoidably into a chaos that will be echoed in self-congratulatory dithyrambs.

This ongoing, open and pluralistic debate should question why after successfully meeting the challenge of getting rights and access to professional education institutionalized we have not yet been able to activate mechanisms designed to keep powerful people from excluding blacks and mestizos from spaces that by right and talent belong to them.

Instead of referring to achievements not even her active imagination can handle, the author should ask herself why those in power have not initiated ways to ensure equity in the representation of blacks and the growing mestizo population that characterize the labor force in Cuban society, in institutional positions, at companies, and in the media.

The heavy burden of imposed marginality and the undeniable cultural gaps that still plague us after years and years of colonialism and exclusion, the insensitive indolence of elites often incapable of hiding their racial intolerance and still unable to bring to fruition the discourse of equality and integration, force us to firmly and resolutely face the challenge of placing citizens and communities at the center of a debate that should also include the intelligentsia, to quickly rescue these civic spaces. It will take committed officials such as Ms. Arandía deciding publicly and consciously to assume responsibility for opening up this debate for us to be on our way to making accessible real social equality and, above all, beginning a bottom-up effort to break the silence that so pains us.