

Internalized Racism

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In examining racism in Cuba, one must consider the following assertion by scholar Wenda Trevathov: “to avoid race, treat it as though it were not a valid or invalid concept in physical anthropology is at least to bury one’s head in the sand, at the very least, if not the worse thing possible: to assume an unethical position.”¹

There is no institutionalized racism in Cuba, according to Article 42 of the Constitution. Nevertheless, internalized racism involves a different kind of institutionalization that has more to do with customs, a mindset and culture. This reveals nothing more or less than the fact that black men and women suffer discrimination. This kind of racism works in a surreptitious, fraternal way and has become part of the Cuban people’s mindset. It flourishes in almost all aspects of daily life. Some intellectuals call it friendly or cordial racism.

According to Juan A. Alvarado Ramos, prejudices, myths and racial barriers “persist, often causing serious generational conflicts in families and even amongst groups of friends.”² Racial prejudice is not expressed only by members of the older generation but also by many young people, who “have obviously internalized and accepted received ways of thinking about race that are on occasion negatively reinforced by real life experiences.”³ Before 1959, racism was expressed openly, and even though it was legally prohibited after 1959, it was never truly abolished, and now exists in a masked manner in all walks of life. This is why we should not keep talking about throwbacks,

vestiges, past memories or prejudices: we should acknowledge that there is a problem and, worse yet, that its existence is denied. People deny being racists but have racism on the brain, as is obvious in their views, behavior, conduct, customs, references, etc.

My goal is to demonstrate that racism is part of the Cuban mindset and defines Cubans’ social and cultural self-perception. Using examples of linguistic racism (a form of communication that includes body language and emotional nuances), I hope to reveal just how little basic progress we have made with regard to how and where signifiers and cultural models of coexistence are created and recreated.

The chronology of racism in post 1959 Cuba and the lifelong view of blacks reveals how in interpersonal relations the black race is associated with failure, evil, negativity, delinquent behavior and criminals (thieves, purse snatchers, voyeurs, aggressive and abusive people, scandal mongers, vulgar people, sexual predators, rapists, masturbators, public mashers, etc.). It is noteworthy that a large percentage of those interviewed attempted to reaffirm all of the above, right after saying: “and it’s no lie; it’s the truth.” Some laughed, others cried: some showed disdain for or rejection of the black race while yet others focused on black fatalism. Considering that most folks living in marginalized neighborhoods are black, and that most convicts are too, I wonder what the effect of racism is on their behavior and self-esteem.

We urgently need to have a conversation on the issue of black identity. It is not too

extreme to say that most blacks have not had much of a hand in constructing their own identities. This identity is not clear even in the context of religion, an area that has lent itself to a recreation of origins. Black men and women must gaze in a mirror of 'otherness' to construct their self-perception, which limits their possibilities in reconstructing their identities. Two fundamental concepts—received notions of beauty and of language—hold the key to understanding this dilemma. My own work focuses mostly on popular language: it is where deep cultural tenets are expressed unfet-

tered by intellectually motivated trappings or subterfuges.

Many are well-known expressions or phrases: others not so much so. All reflect the difficult and sophisticated work that cultures undertake to create their underpinnings, and that no effort to conceal this can deny. These need to be exposed, unveiled, so they can be "discovered." The first stage of this archaeological work requires further theorization, so we may better understand their deeper meaning. I will begin with popular "racial" classifications.

Table 1

- Blue-black: very dark and matt skin; very black and curly hair, black eyes.
- Telephone-colored black: very dark and shiny skin; very curly hair; black eyes.
- *Cocotimba* black: dark or very dark skin; very sparse, curly, black and tightly wound, nappy hair; black eyes.
- Cone-headed black: dark or very dark skin, very black and curly hair; black eyes, prominent dolichocephaly.
- Black: varied shades of dark skin; very black and curly hair; black or dark brown eyes.
- Moor: dark skin, slightly curly and black hair; black eyes.
- Mulatto: cinnamon-colored skin of varied intensity; curly and black hair; dark brown or black eyes.
- Chinese-like mulatto: cinnamon or light cinnamon-colored skin, somewhat curly hair, black eyes slanted by an epicanthic fold.
- Grocery bag-colored mulatto: light cinnamon-colored skin, black and slightly curly hair, dark brown or black eyes.
- Whitish-skinned mulatto: very light cinnamon-colored skin, dark brown or black, slightly curly hair, dark brown or black eyes.
- Bronze-skinned person: bronzed skin, black and somewhat curly hair; black eyes.
- *Jabao* [light-skinned black person]: light cinnamon or ocre-colored skin, curly and dark yellow hair, light brown or green eyes.
- *Colorao* [Reddish-skinned black]: reddish and normally freckled skin, curly or wavy reddish hair, brown or light brown hair.
- *Chino*: light yellowish skin, very black and straight hair, black eyes slanted by an epicanthic fold.
- White: light skin, straight or wavy, brown or black hair, brown or black eyes.
- *Rubio* [fair-skinned]: light skin, straight or wavy, light or dark yellow hair, green, blue or light brown eyes.
- Borderline white: socially, this may be taken to mean 'marginal'; biologically, it is a synonym of miscegenation; very sun resistant light skin, black and wavy or curly hair, dark brown or black eyes.

- Milky-skinned white: very light and regularly freckled skin, light brown and wavy or straight hair, brown or black eyes.
 - Albino: pigmentless skin, curly or very curly and light yellow hair, light eyes.
- Source: Guanche Pérez, Jesús: "Etnicidad y racialidad en la Cuba actual," *Temas* 7 (1996): 54.

Depending on the context, all these terms can have a positive or negative connotation. It is also useful and interesting to clarify the roots of certain words, for example, "mulatto," whose original purpose was to describe the offspring of a mare and a donkey: a mule. By extension, it was applied derogatorily in the eighteenth century to a son or daughter born of a white man and black woman. In other words, it was a synonym for bastardy, for something not natural with regard to lineage or culture. Thus, this concept did not come about to describe different skin hues or to indicate racial "progress" [whitening]. Instead, it was used to describe the unwanted result of a hidden liaison. So, mulattoes, too, are rejected and discriminated, and even they eventually develop a virulent form of racism towards their own origin.

Other sayings reflect disdain for blacks from the time they are in their mother's wombs. This uterine racism is expressed in the presence of pregnant women, in phrases like "she's going to have a black future," or "I see you

combing nappy hair in the near future," or in linguistic wordplay like "How long does it take to throw out that trash? Nine months."

There is an abundant inventory of derogatory expressions about blacks: 'negro piolo,' for those blacks who feel attracted to people of other races, principally whites; 'negro e mierda' [shitty black]; 'negro tiñoso' [mangy black]; 'el negro, apesta' [blacks smell]; 'negro infernal' [damned black], or simply 'chardo' [nigger], which appears to be a corruption of the English *shadow*. Socially, the word can be used in both a positive or negative manner, for example: "Hey, what's up with this *chardo*?" is derogatory, but "Check out that *charda*. She's really special" is a positive reference to a black woman's beauty.

The intelligence of blacks is played down with the stereotype that they are good only for music, criminal behavior and sports. If there is a group of blacks and whites together conversing, blacks are playfully told '*according to the color line, it's not your turn to talk*,' when the individuals in the group take turns conversing.

Table 2

- Let's do things the way white people do them.
- If a black guy is seated next to a white driver, he must have gotten a ride; if he is driving, he is the white guy's chauffeur.
- If you see a white person in with a group of blacks, he is the most intelligent one of them all; if you see a black person in with a group of whites, he is the most criminally-minded of them all.
- A black man and a white man together: guaranteed theft; the white man is the brains; the black man carries it out.
- Blacks don't know how to take advantage of opportunities.
- God made blacks to create a group but when he saw how dumb they were he sent them to the Devil.
- On the subject of walking on the shady side of the street, one hears: let's walk on the white side of the street.

- Do not do business with blacks.
- Business with blacks is black business.
- 1868 was the first time that slaves in Cuba were freed, but they wanted to continue being slaves. They didn't know what to do with their freedom. Worse yet is the fact that many blacks still want to be slaves.
- After the battles of Playa Girón [Bay of Pigs] in 1961, there was a black man among the prisoners of Brigade 2506 who Fidel Castro asked: What are you doing here?

If one pays attention to the way things are said, there are blacks and then there are "blacks." In a bad mood, someone might say: "I'm not in the mood for blacks today." Blacks are also called *niches*, an in-group term as well. It derives from a corruption of the English

"nigger," which itself is a corruption of the Latin *negare*, a verb whose meaning is to 'denigrate' (defame, insult, dishonor...). The following examples demonstrate how this concept is employed:

Table 3

- What you did was a black thing (you did it badly).
- To be black and an espadrille is one and the same thing.
- Black? Not even my shoes.
- Black? Just my shoes, to beat them up plenty.
- Black? Not even the kitchen kettle.
- Black? Not even the coffee or beans.
- Black? Your mamma!
- Black? Not on your life!
- All blacks are the same to me.
- Of course he had to be black.
- Blacks ruin everything.
- One way or another, blacks will screw it up.
- You have to forgive him; look at what color he is.
- Damn! That black guy is a pill!
- Damn! That black guy is ugly!

People tend to call a group of black men a *negrada* [a mess of blacks], and the worse member of a family the 'black sheep.' There are offensive expressions like 'he's so black it hurts,' or even '*negrotom*,' to imply a submissive nature, deriving from the U.S. term 'Uncle Tom.'

Body language is another area in which

racism can be observed. If a black man goes near a woman walking on the street, her nearly subconscious reaction is to squeeze her purse closer to her body because of the reputation blacks have for being purse-snatchers. White people get quiet when a black person arrives. Ladies make the sign of the cross when they see an interracial couple.

Table 4

- A black man and a white woman don't go together.
- A black man who wants to be with a white woman has to make her like a queen.

- To each his own.
- White women are for white men.
- A black person with a white person is like a fly in milk.
- I love this black guy as a brother, but not as a brother-in-law.
- I have nothing against blacks, but I just don't like them.

Another illustrative example: despite being married to a white woman, a young black man feels “these kinds of unions are very problematic, because of the contradictions that arise with white families on account of them.”⁴

Stereotypes also promote the notion that people of the black race are sexually powerful, and tend to animalize black male and female sexuality. Even in attempting to create a positive image, by associating the assumed genetic predisposition with a virtue, racism is reproduced.

Blacks are often associated with crime, as a few popular expressions show: “One black, one idea; two blacks, two ideas; three blacks,

armed robbery” or “If a dog barks, there's a black guy in your house.” When things are lost or misplaced, one can hear: “There weren't any blacks here!” If two black men walk by, the automatic question is: “I wonder what they're up to?” If some kind of compromising situation arises, and it requires a violent action to save face, one might hear the following recommendation: “hire a bunch of black guys and let them work him [the perpetrator] over.”

Around 1994, a group of people shared and enjoyed reading the following series of analogies whose intention was humor⁵ and not racial discrimination:

Table 5

	White man	Black man
• with uniform	colonel	baggage handler
• with pistol	cautious	attacker
• going up hill	mountain climber	on way to prison
• with painted nails	playboy	faggot
• with briefcase	executive	drug trafficker
• with chauffeur	millionaire	prisoner
• eating a lot	getting nourishment	behaving starved
• playing pool	elegant	gambling addiction
• reading newspaper	intellectual	looking for work
• wearing sandals	tourist	pot head
• with an itch	has allergies	has mange
• running	sportsman	purse snatcher

Blacks are also associated with real or imagined defects, and with fatalism. This makes it possible to mark someone by calling him ‘black,’ and on top of that, ‘a queer’ (homosexual), a thief, dumb, disorganized, filthy (dirty), rowdy, gossipy, unpleasant, vulgar and even treasonous (anti-Castro). These catego-

rizations can also be constructed using the reverse order, e.g., ‘filthy,’ and on top of that, ‘black.’ The counterpart is a black man or woman who behaves well. Then one hears expressions that allude to how tough it is for blacks to ‘behave well or appear to do well or good,’ when the assumption is that their color

does not allow them to do so, for example: “What’s she acting so refined for: she’s so black.”

Postmodern, political correctness often serves to mask so-called friendly or cordial racism, to mitigate its impact. The very Cuban expression “el que no tiene de congo tiene de carabali” [He who does not have Congo blood in him has Carabali blood] is intended to be positive, because it alludes to miscegenation in Cuban society. Similarly, when one hears “that black guy is pretty polished,” “there are some blacks with class,” or “he’s not just any black man,” or when adolescents compose lines like: *they say that blackness is sad/I say that’s not true/because the best kisses are given in the dark*, the intention is also positive.

One of singer-songwriter Ricardo Arjona’s songs offers the following lyric: *blacks have swing, whites have freckles*, but certainly a black person has to be three times better than a white person to receive societal recognition, so he or she may be treated in a way that is not insulting, or in which he or she is not considered a disgrace to the race. On the other hand, there are aspects of popular humor, disdain and associations that reflect the degree to which racism and discrimination can be elaborate and sophisticated, as in this definition of a black man: “Animal species, very much like man in that it walks erect and has an identity card.

Its body is divided into three parts: legs, thick lips and tail. Its habitat: recreation and sporting zones, preferably in the evening hours. It can be found in corrals, chicken coops, other people’s yards and occasionally looking at holes, if it is not in captivity. Characteristics of the species: flat nose, unique odor; passionate about white women and tape players; also afraid of bathing and working. Alone, they are inoffensive but in packs they are quite dangerous. They differ from man in that when a white man dies the wake lasts 24 hours, whereas if there is a black man around, he’s the one watched for 24 hours.”

Blacks are often associated with bad luck or badness: a black situation, black market, black humor, black box, black life, things are just going black with spots of grey, I had a black time of it, they have black hearts, they are blackhearted, a black future awaits us, he is so black he can smudge you, your wife was caught with a black guy under her bed, etc. Not to mention there is the following expressions: “they’re black but I love them as though they were family” or even a very recent one: “Whites applauded Barack Obama’s speech at the Democratic Convention (2008) as though he were a white god.”

It is not uncommon to hear people say things that separate black folks from good qualities.

Table 6

- He’s black, but he’s a good father.
- He’s black, but he puts on a good show.
- He/she’s black, but he/she is a good husband/wife.
- He/she’s black, but “knows” how to speak properly and express himself/herself.
- He/she’s black, but behaves like a white person.
- When a black person takes charge...!
- He/she’s black, but decent.
- He/she’s black, but a serious person.
- He/she’s black, but honest.
- He/she’s black, but makes an impression.

Racism is a two-way street. One is established with a sense of superiority and provokes another, which is expressed from a received or supposed position of inferiority that rejects white people. It has a thousand ways of being expressed in Cuban society and can be called reactive or defensive racism, a reverse racism that can be as damaging as the original.

In light of all the aforementioned words and expressions, it is important to consider that racism is a permanent challenge to the nation's stability. The Cuban government must acknowledge this hugely evident problem more openly and clearly. There is an ambiguous line between racism and a moral crisis, or crisis of values, even if one of the values upon which the new society was to be constructed was the legal elimination of this scourge. Racism makes difficult the building of self-esteem necessary for the development of a healthy society and families. How can we advance in other areas if we do not create a positive psychosocial environment for individuals, groups of individuals and families? It is a complicated matter because there is even black-on-black racism and many blacks doubt the possibility of true racial integration. Blacks, particularly, are very pessimistic, which means it is urgent for all of us to reverse this defeatist view towards our nation's possibilities.

The area that needs the most work is the public sphere. We need to discuss aesthetic models, because they affect self-esteem and identity in an age in which basically one's personality is shaped by television. At an even deeper level, we must get beyond the idea that just being born black (being formed and shaped in a black womb) punishes children before they are born, and punishes their mothers, because it forces them to 'wash' their identities through 'whitening' and reproduces marginal and marginalizing behavior in people who see blacks as having specific genetic traits. This might explain marginal violence as a response to the violence that racism

itself embodies and perpetrates.

We must reject our medieval notions concerning humor, because they focus on people and types of humans. One of our most distinctive idiosyncrasies as a people is that our humor is based above all on race. But humor, which is imminently social, is also a psychosocial way of 'venting' in the face of unbearable or intolerable situations, and difficult to reasonably change. If we look beyond the humor, it is easy to conclude that Cuban society is profoundly racist.

There is urgency in the work before us because racism is dangerously thwarting and because other forms of racism are taking hold in Cuba. Their establishment in Cuban society is facilitated through more conventional kinds of racism. Regional racism, basically against easterners, who are pejoratively called 'Palestinians,' serves to illustrate our disdain for other cultures and people, too. We could never do too much in our fight against racism. The impact its cultural denunciation would have is immeasurable.

Notes:

1. En Guanche Pérez, Jesús. "Etnicidad y racialidad en la Cuba actual". *Temas 7*, La Habana, 1996: 54.
2. Alvarado, Juan A.: "Relaciones raciales en Cuba", *Temas 7*, La Habana, 1996: 41.
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. Caño, Secade, Maria del C. «Relaciones raciales, proceso de ajuste y políticas sociales», *Temas 7*, La Habana, 1996: 62.

Other Sources:

1. *Constitución de la República de Cuba*. Ediciones Ministerio de Justicia, La Habana, 2004.
2. De la Torre Molina, Carolina. *Las Identidades: una mirada desde la Psicología*. Editorial Ruth Casa. Fundación Juan Marinello, La Habana, 2008.
3. Goleman, Daniel. *Inteligencia Emocional*. Editorial Kairós. Numancia, España, 1997.
4. Morales, Domínguez Esteban. *Desafíos de la problemática racial en Cuba*. Editorial La fuente Viva, 2007.
5. Torroella, Gustavo. *Aprender a vivir y a convivir*. Editorial Científico-Técnica. La Habana, 2005.
6. *El cubano de hoy: un estudio psicosocial*. Fundación Fernando Ortiz, La Habana, 2003.