

Politics and Color in Cuba

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Even at the beginning of the new century, just as back in the colonial and republican times, black Cuban political commitment continues to be made to 'disappear.' I was reminded of writer and journalist Pedro Pérez Sarduy when Orlando Zapata Tamayo died. In a talk he gave at Florida International University, he affirmed that we Cuban blacks are not interested in politics.

Many of us who are part of the "subversive enlightenment" felt bothered by his statement because it once again benefited the arguments being made—from a totally racist and exclusionary position—that persistently deny the mark that blacks and *mestizos* have made on the political history of their nation.

Black Cubans may have participated in the creation of an independent Cuba, but we remain at the margins of history. Even so, we have been agents of change in our country's social and political order. Yet, the instilling of fear of blacks is a strategy still being openly employed by some; this continues going on and is just one of many kinds of racism. Cuban racism is the result of slavery's violence; its roots are in the conquest and colonization of the island. It is an ideological tool that contin-

ues to stigmatize black men as social enemies. The road they must follow is still quite long; racism has allowed its impact, and this impact's scope and range amongst its victims, to continue expanding.

The philosophy behind miscegenation helps hide the fact that racism, as an ideology, is deeply rooted in interpersonal relations, daily practices, and institutional environments. The effects this had on the life of free man and conspirator José Antonio Aponte, an unknown hero of our educational curriculum, are still being felt. Aponte is not the only educated black man who left his mark on our nation's political history. We could add the names of Martín Morúa Delgado, Rafael Serra, Generoso Campos Marquetti, Margarito Gutiérrez, Antonio Medina Céspedes, Miguel Ángel, Gustavo Urrutia, Evaristo Estenoz, and Sandalio Junco to that long list of names and images that are frozen in historical time. To those we could add names such as those of famous female journalists like Cristina Ayala, Úrsula Coimbra de Valverde, poet África de Céspedes, Catalina Medina (daughter of Antonio Medina), Carmelina Sarracent, and Salie Derosme, from the repub-

lic's earliest years. They actively worked on the publications *Minerva* and *El Nuevo Criollo*.

History's silences allow for the reproduction of stereotyped lifestyles, through narratives, historiography, and audiovisual methods. From the 1990s on, Cuban society witnessed a new wave of prejudicial and discriminatory practices no less dramatic than those of the republic of 'general and doctors' (of early twentieth-century Cuba), since the black population, which was much more than just society's weakest link, continued to be victimized by the characteristics and risks of extreme poverty. The generational reproduction of these disadvantages can be seen in whole families. A large number of them can be found trapped in social and cultural ghettos. Black Cuban political identity continues to be held hostage. Nowhere in sight are a positively reaffirmed black aesthetic and a move towards the solidarity needed to form political collectivities

Exclusion on the basis of skin color tends to perpetuate itself. It is still the case that black Cubans cannot find real and sustainable possibilities for holding politically relevant and formal positions, to promote changes and make decisions that can truly bring about their representativity. They do not have active participation on the same footing with other citizens, male or female, regardless of race, sex or political inclination.

The socio-economic situation that blacks and *mestizos* face is evidence of the fact that

racism is not just a conceptual and cultural issue. The economic factor is also highly influential. Racism determines one's quality of life and produces a shattering of identity. This is a privately public phenomenon that is part of the nation; it needs to be debated publicly amongst all of us. Racism is not just a conflict and instrument of power. It is a silenced zone of tension that allows the destruction of the dynamic between the races and the Revolution.

The absence of a political public and the relentless harassment of independent citizens' demands allows for impunity. Protesting, criticizing the regime, and being black are a double-edged, real danger. We have the testimonies of Jesús Yáñez Pelletier, Jesús Chambert Ramírez, Eusebio Peñalver Mazorra, Jorge Luis García Pérez (Antúnez), and Oscar Elías Biscet to prove it. We also have proof of this in the ostracism to which Walterio Carbonell was condemned; Juan René Betancourt's exile; Carlos Moore's forced exile; the shutting down of the Black and Maceo Societies in Cuba; the demonization of black politicians who were members of Gerardo Machado's and Fulgencio Batista's political regimes, etc.

Orlando Zapata Tamayo's destruction, and the powerful, anti-Cuban arrogance and double discrimination that black leaders and activists face today, which manipulate equally a whole country's history and fate, are a model example of the determination which poorer Cubans fight to protect their identities and self-worth.