

Fear of Blacks (I)

María I. Faguaga Iglesias
Historian and anthropologist
Havana, Cuba

*A man is always resident in the castle
of his skin.*

George Lamming
The Pleasures of Exile (1960)

Preface

Like a good Caribbean, living with total freedom and complacency in “his castle of skin,” and not giving the Devil time to work,¹ researcher and essayist Dr. Juan F. Benemelis worked patiently and laboriously to crown his efforts with a book he later regaled us with—*El miedo al negro: antropology de la colonialidad* [Fear of Blacks: Anthropology of Coloniality] (Kingston: The Ceiba Institute of Afro-Cuban Studies, 2012).

In the following pages, I will attempt to review this publication, a book that truly deserves a number of serious reviews that go beyond just summarizing it, and really delve into its complexities, continuities, discontinuities and dialogues (with itself, and with other works and authors). All of Benemelis’s books deserve this. My review is an unpolished attempt to do so, and only focuses on a few of its relevant aspects (all are relevant). It is an

exercise in intellectual acrobatics that takes risky leaps without benefit of a net. Unfortunately, there has hardly been any serious, deep criticism—free of attacks and virulence—in the Cuba of recent decades. This has resulted in impoverishment. After the 1960s, harmful censorship and self-censorship was imposed and still prevails. The act of introducing in everyone the idea of policing one’s self, alienating us against others and ourselves, has been a much more effective mechanism of domination than situating a police chief in each neighborhood.

This author’s reality is different (although sometimes similar, too). He began his book with an *auto-da-fe* and then immediately continued digging his finger into the oozing wound of a continent about to sociologically and structurally remake itself—the only one to succeed after many failed attempts to remake itself politically. “I think the arbitrariness of gender and race is the worse injustice of the modern world.” This is how Benemelis categorically begins his text and brings us into it, admonishing us to join him in exploring a logic that we should all find inescapable and irrefutable in the twenty-first century: “both

sexual and racial differences are ideologically constructed as biological ‘facts’ of importance to society, thus naturalizing and legitimating social inequality.” Still embracing and latched on to the worst of modernity, we are already in the second decade of a convulsive century and there are those who cannot or will not understand this logic.

He then goes on to explain: “The modern world was shaped by racism, which is why it has been so difficult for the descendants of African slaves to achieve equity. Thus, it is not possible to broach the subject of the State and nation, Antillean culture and society, in America, or in general, without considering racism, ethnicity, social hierarchy, the lack of decolonization and *criollo*-nationalism. These topics are not fully dealt with on our continent because it would require us to become entrenched in politically and socially reorganizing our States and nations.”

Broaching them in all their complexity and variable levels is exactly what this historian does. At a time of emerging subalterities, could someone possibly come up with an effective argument to disagree with what he says? It is always possible although not always plausible to deny certain ideas. Often, disagreeing with something undeniable leaves the disagreeer—generally obeying a logic stemming from spurious interests—in a weak position. In reading this text, we can appreciate that it is nearly impossible for anyone to come up with a sensible and well founded argument against many of the ideas (some his own, others assumed and reworked, or accepted as is) contained therein.

American coloniality

Coloniality is a reality those of us who were born in colonized countries cannot es-

cape, no matter how much we’d like to. This is even more the case for those born in societies originally created according to the colonial will of the European nations of the time. In the Americas, the combination of colonialism and modernity, followed by coloniality and modernity, has been indissoluble and inseparable, and often involved juxtaposed realities.

The colonialism imposed by our mother countries on our vast physical and ethno-racial space gave rise to the origin of American modernity. It would be the white, pro-independence *criollos* who would impose coloniality on us, after achieving our first, formal independence. They forced their native, black and *mestizo* compatriots into subalterity, forced them to the social margins, and caused them to be excluded in their own countries. This had and still has multidimensional effects on the spiritual and material development of our nations. This and much more is the stuff of Dr. Benemelis’s 500-page book, a text that is neither tedious nor seems too long to its readers. Quite to the contrary, readers will most likely plough from chapter 1 to 38 eagerly taking in all the information and interpretation this author—who wants to leave nothing unsaid regarding race—offers them. His is a crosscutting approach to race; he understands he must consider innumerable social realities. A number of his chapters confirm his notion that we were forced into being as colonized and modern nations on a continent that has been re-baptized by social scientists as Indo-Afro-Hispanic America—because of ethnogenesis. Just like the brightest and clearest thinkers today, the author makes it very clear that this structure we were given, that shaped the way we live our lives, has been constantly tweaked after our independence efforts. The manner in which it was employed by a willful and dominating, supremacist caste of

the pro-independence, white *criollos* gave rise to our form of coloniality.

Benemelis points out how willing we are to forget and how we are compelled to do so: “The official image of our national identity was...created by the white and *mestizo*-white elite based on the idea of miscegenation—understood as whitening—thus making invisible its racial and ethnic diversity.” So, objective and subjective coloniality weigh heavily on how we think, limiting our possibility to do so freely, autochthonously and legitimately. “This hegemonic, universalist and neutral epistemology deal in color and sexuality. This explains why the alienation of those whose colonization begins with language, because they mimic the accent and language of the colonizer, thus linguistically becoming quasi-whites who reject even their own ‘*criollismo*.’”

Does Cuban academe talk about coloniality?

Much has been said, argued and theorized about colonialism and coloniality during the past six decades. There are prominent examples in the Americas of social scientists who extrapolate what they know from their own theoretical work on our own continental particularities and universalize that in an international academic arena. Directly or indirectly, there are some who have used their own voices to take a stand on the subject of coloniality: from Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon to our current generation, e.g., Peruvian Aníbal Quijano, Brazilian Bonaventura de Sousa Santos, Argentine-Mexican Enrique Dussel, Puerto Rican Ramón Grosfoguel and others (as a category of people who enunciate and articulate a confluence of interests with these earlier thinkers without the different time periods really mattering).

It is noteworthy that the Cuban intelligentsia, with the honorable exception of people like Walterio Carbonell and Antonio Benítez Rojo, barely focuses its attention on the complex phenomenon of colonialism and coloniality. It is noteworthy precisely because it is highly improbable that Cuba could achieve true national sovereignty, ethno-racial integration, acknowledgement of diversity, actually functioning through diversity and having social justice, without shedding the social, psychological and intellectual structure of coloniality. It is precisely at this level that the intelligentsia, as a social sector, could contribute to an inclusive re-founding of our unfinished and fragmented nation.

It is in this sense that *El miedo al negro: Antropología de la colonialidad* is an important book. This is obvious from the accurate, decisive and very necessary information we find in its pages. The author is able to skillfully synthesize basic ideas and shake our consciences: “Any attempt to simplify the evolution of Afro-Cuban culture will result in its reduction to a colonial-postcolonial framework. This conclusion has never taken into consideration the island’s incomplete decolonization beyond its current post-colonial condition. An irrefutable fact explains this: after its independence, Cuba never began a process of decolonization. This would have meant having to redact its Iberian, colonial culture, and a total vindication of blacks. This explains why we do not have an epic work on José A. Aponte, Antonio Maceo or Quintín Banderas, and our culture has shown apathy for the horrors of slavery, the Weyler ‘reconcentration,’ the 1912 race massacre, and racial discrimination.”

Then, Dr. Benemelis, an Afro-Cuban truly devoted to the topic, irrupts on the Cuban intellectual scene. His entire *oeuvre*, even work apparently distant from the subject, seems to

lead us to it. Crossing the changeable, diffuse and blurry boundaries of history and even political science in the entirety of his analysis has come naturally for him. He is a historian who has had a lengthy diplomatic career. He knows our complex and fragmented Caribbean, the complexity and multiplicity of Africa, old Europe's decadent and bombastic arrogance, new America's similarities, differences, ruptures and continuities—through personal experience. He includes much of this in his book, unassumingly. Those of us who know the caliber of his work, the qualities of the man who took it on and happily finished it, can discern his professional biography. Much of it is apparent in the experience he gained while traveling the world over, and because of his contact with people such as Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X and Walterio Carbonell.

The book is a survey: nothing involving anything from a conceptualization to an analysis of postmodernity—nothing—is left unconsidered, if it concerns raciality as it is expressed through anti-black racism, something the author knows firsthand. The text's title functions well within its organic nature; it is attractive to us because we fully understand it. Furthermore, just when we expect to read only about the issue of the ethnicity and race of African descendants, we find much, much more—about the complexities of the multiple levels at and spaces in which it is expressed, the way in which it has been examined theoretically, ideologically, anthropologically and politically all around the island, till now. Yet, although this would seem to suffice, the author goes further. He examines the relationship between the ethno-racial problem and the dissolution of Marxist national States during the twentieth century; the presentation of Marxism as a nurturing source for Fascist National-Socialism; the diasporic thought of

African descendants with their own, early understanding of the fact that Marxism did not satisfy the needs of that population; the racist Marxism of the Soviet Russians and Chinese; the difference between colonialism and coloniality; between decolonization and postcoloniality, and so much more. All this, and so much more, makes the title Benemelis chose for this book seem even more suited—better yet—to our great surprise and intellectual satisfaction.

What we have in this lengthy and substantial volume is a detailed treatment of the ethno-racial subject, an approach that is revealing of how confused and confusing a racist framework ends up being as a system for domination and subjection, for stagnating a perverse *status quo* that does not go away with the government's institutionalization of what is called "real socialism." No other essayist of Cuban history has so broadly or so interdisciplinarily attacked this subject. The book's 500 pages urge us to dialogue with its thesis, arguments and exegesis. In his generous, thematic exposé, the author, himself, dialogues with a long list of racist and anti-racist authors—past and present—without considering academic credentials or historical trends. In thinking about what we might call the "classics" of pseudo-scientific, racist theory, like Gaubineau, we also have to consider the names of many Cubans, too, who have no reason to envy the Frenchmen, given their own work.

It is equally important that Benemelis allows those implicated in the subject of anti-black racism, and those who endure it, to speak for themselves, something not too common among historians. Activists, professionals and common citizens engaged in the ethno-racial cause are given space on his pages, because each one of their voices can tell

a story and should find a place in academic analysis. Upon completing the book, one has a vast understanding of the issue's depth and complexity, a theoretical framework with which to analyze it and design a civil or more strictly political course of action. One has a better cognitive framework with which to craft tactics and strategies for trying to start a process of real decolonization, emancipation and construction for the Cuban nation. This requires a review and analysis of the problem's history, as well as of the support and promotion it has had since the nation's inception—through and through. Yet, it is not a text just for Cubans interested in the subject. It is for anyone in Afro-America or beyond involved in emancipatory struggles, even in those whose participants and objectives are different. The book's explicit and implicit episteme and conclusions can serve as guides or references for other victims of systemic domination.

Seen as such, the audience for this monumental, descriptive, explanatory and interpretive narrative are common citizens, the intelligentsia (not always well acquainted with so complex an issue, one with a huge dramatic weight that is virtually unacknowledged), politicians, and those who selfishly reproduce the system or cynically camouflage a reality that is as tangible as it is sensitive, as traumatic as traumatizing.

Uncomfortable professional ethics

An identification of the problems can start with an acknowledgment of what is at a personal, individual and collective level. Benemelis understands the importance of this and applies it to his work, unlike other Cuban intellectuals on the island, who are either so immersed in other realities, in foreign lands, ones that Cubans doesn't experience, thus

denying or ignoring real national problems. Benemelis did not learn that “the pain of not being acknowledged can be as terrible as that of slavery's exploitation” or that “many demands for recognition amount to nothing at all unless it involves some kind of a redistribution policy”.² Instead, he learned it from the reality of his own life and that of his compatriots.

Neither did he discover multiculturalism outside of Cuba, but rather in his beloved Santiago, his adopted, regional 'homeland,' a cultural melting pot, a physical expression of a Caribbeanness of which he proudly takes part. He and his compatriots identify with this and deplore the fact that European descendant Cubans have a tendency to turn their backs on it. Of course, he deplores “the Antillean paradox of not considering oneself to be black and behaving subjectively as white.” In an ethically professional manner, Dr. Benemelis not only participates in the theorization of that he also deconstructs—the racialized, anti-black system of domination—but also works civically on behalf of the future deconstruction of that system. Likewise, he had already begun to compile works by numerous, multigenerational essayists who reside in or outside Cuba, all of whom broach the subject of raciality in their own way. He has also organized and co-organized workshops and conferences in which some if not all of them have participated.

In Cuba, there continues to be a paradox in the fact that unconditional, political loyalties to the current political project—with its atrophied nation—reign over the intellectual commitment of an academic world that calls itself “Cuban.” In turn, Cuban academe entirely ignores him as a professional and person—something it does to others, too. Moreover, even among those who must behave

in this manner there are those who secretly follow the work of a colleague that has been forcibly exiled (perhaps because books Benemelis has sent other colleagues in Cuba have gone astray, and fallen into the wrong hands). Fortunately, there are some of us who are outside this space who have been discovering him and his work, acknowledging and following it carefully.

Ethno-racial identity and identity among subalternized, Afro-Cuban intellectuals: a possibility

Dr. Benemelis's formulations make us see that we are facing or are immersed in an *othered* sort of rationality: the rationality of a subaltern intellectual constructed as a sharp, important and inspiring, critical voice from the depths of the ethno-racial subalterity to which it consciously belongs. That may not have been the author's original intent, but consciously or not, Benemelis's voice is just that—a critical voice speaking from a position of ethno-racial subalterity. His actions are in keeping with his professional ethics and personal experience, which are intertwined: he is committed to his people, does not exclude himself from their group, and does not see himself as superior to it. Instead, he feels responsible for fulfilling his social role.

What we have before us is an ethno-racial, pro-Negritude, militant who takes on, reaffirms, exteriorizes and displays his militancy from his position as a professional, and he does so without being impertinent—like other intellectuals caught up in useless guises or illusory neutrality do. Not unlike other Afro-Cubans (like Juan Gualberto Gómez and Walterio Carbonell), Benemelis very naturally speaks on behalf of the Cuban nation that is

still possible, but has not yet been constructed. His is not the voice of power, but rather of authority, which explains why his voice elucidates, but does not force things; proposes, but does not impose anything. He guides us through his analytic, explanatory and interpretive narrative with the skill of someone who has conducted much revealing research, because his strong desire for knowledge and acknowledgment urge him on—and it pains him that these remain hidden.

It is easy to see that he positions himself within a historiographic repertoire that revisits history by rereading, reconstructing, reanalyzing, scrutinizing and diving into its opacity and concealment, thus actually completing it with other knowledge. Then it can reveal to us other conclusions inevitably critical of the systems of domination instituted by those wielding power and their accomplices.

Black identity: a political, economic, civic, cultural and social category

The multivarious nature of this subject is found throughout the book, via questions and answers that the author, himself, offers us. In essence, his powerful and complex observations shock our drowsy minds and causes them to work, search and think, to question and question ourselves, to seek our answers in an amply documented text that incites us to reflect and actively participate, and not just accept. This is one of the book's greatest merits.

What does it mean to be black? He asks this and then says there is no way to know, except that he points to the physiomic features by which black people continue to subjectively identify themselves. And, as we already know, it is from this subjectivity that many of the rules of our coexistence stem. Benemelis, like other scholars, has his own interpretation of

what it means to be a black American. He does so by focusing on a specific feature of that socially subalternized subject present consciously or not—in the dynamics of subjectivity and within Afro transnationality: “The African descendant in America, regardless the degree of his hybridity, senses he is a ‘person’ with historical roots and destinies that go beyond the time and space of the nation in which he resides. With regard to ‘black American,’ this is the existential condition African-American DuBois characterizes as a ‘double consciousness’ in dealing with a split (American and African) subjectivity, and the negation of their substantive citizenship by nation-states, because dominant, racist regimes see and classify them as a problem—a situation that can be applied to all of Afro-America.”

The author’s position within his explanation, and the Du Bois concepts he employs for his argument, are fascinating. Cuban scholars have either scarcely valued or totally ignored the work of one of the early, U.S. black, African-American thinkers on the subject of Afro-Americanness and interracial relations. Benemelis does not forget that politically constructed categories of racial classification are of culturally transcendent importance, if they are historically contextualized: “Blacks are the product of a long and complex process resulting from the decantation of nineteenth-century ideas regarding the nature of the nation to be built, and the images that would express it.”

What the author attempts is a detailed analysis of racism, from its origins to its most varied forms and expressions. As he has done in past books, with this one he joins other authors in pointing out that ancient slavery in other historical, cultural, geographic and political contexts did not use race as a classifier. Instead, economics were the determining

factor. The racialization of this phenomenon was imposed by the latter’s slave trade and the system of slavery implanted by European colonial powers in the Americas, where they constructed their empires, at a historically late moment, given Arabs, Asians and black Africans were already well versed in the practice before them. Leading European intellectuals (of a different political persuasion) willfully chose to ignore and marginalize this information, leading to a mythification of Western history. This is inevitable when the work of intellectuals is dependent upon or has to serve those in power. Similarly, Benemelis specifically states that there can be no racism unless it is political, state racism—overtly or not: “Racism, as a phenomenon of social exclusion, cannot be described without looking at the State’s direct or indirect role in it.”

As far as the Cuban case is concerned, he reminds us that “the State intervenes by institutionalizing certain exclusionary rhetoric and practices, and not sanctioning other practices that develop their own dynamic, in specific domains, that thus contribute—directly or indirectly—to the reproduction of different forms of racism and, in ‘extreme’ cases, exercise their power to totally disregard the ‘other.’ Education serves to perpetuate this monocultural view of Cuba; no new books have replaced those that represent blacks as marginalized from economic development and culture.”

A truism: imposed, hierarchical Christianity is racist and ethnicist

Despite the book’s title, the author does not focus on anti-black racism exclusively. There is no value in this minimizing and accusatory descriptor, which is so easy to employ when one’s intention is to discredit. It would

be like pigeonholing something as common as “essentialism” or “reverse racism.” It would be difficult to find any of this in Benemelis’s text. As far as white ethnocentrism is concerned, it contains ample reminders and references of something we often ignore or forget—no hierarchy of origins and cultures was imposed on any population that was not intended for slavery—it was not necessary.

This text is full of uncomfortable truths for those in power, for those agents and accomplices who would likely find them offended: “Racism is a discursive projection of a modern, patriarchal, monotheistic economic structure that instrumentalized human groups according to supposedly genealogical principles, and universalism’s apparent hegemony.” This is a platitude most of those who are guilty of this do not want to hear. Yet, this is revealing of the kind of commitment those who begin the difficult task of denying something substantially provable really have: that the power structure’s anti-black racism coincides with the identical practices of Christian churches convinced of the cultural “superiority” all throughout Afro-America—despite that fact that “the notion of chosen race or nation serves as an example of one of monotheism’s disasters.” It is with this vacuous reasoning that Christian denominations and those with cultural power have managed to discredit Afro-inspired religions, denying them even a status as religions, the former classifying them as “demonic,” while the latter calls them “expressions of popular religiosity,” in order to reduce all of them to “folklore”—a reductive term and concept, if there ever was one. Thus, Christian theological officials and their churches’ hierarchies disqualify “popular” or “uncultured” Christianity and situate it with Afro or aboriginal cultural practices.

Ultimately, the “combination of religious faith and a desire for power and fortune” that pervaded the Spanish peninsula—a combination with which they began their reconquest of Spain against the Moors—was brought to America in Christopher Columbus’s ships, only to be conferred upon us, along with racism, as a support system for power relations. This cannot be ignored in an objective analysis of power elites in Info-Afro-Hispano-America. All of this was intended to maintain and prolong the mandate of those in power. If blacks and their Africanness represented a problem or threat to nations the supremacists designed from the top down—regardless the social authenticity or legitimacy of the nation’s creative and recreative processes—then “the political rhetoric and practice of those in power attempted to accelerate a process of “de-Africanization” that from early on involved Castilianization, Catholicism, proletarianization and, finally, reductive folklorization.”

Racism and Castro-Socialism: fear as a way to perpetuate the status quo

What is clear is that once that construct is created, “no matter in what social context racism is present as a form of discriminating and excluding ‘others,’ there is a common denominator—fear—which injects an extremely high dose of aggression into any behavior. The accusation behind it can crop up at any time or place. All that is needed for discrimination to start is for the accused to belong to a detested minority. The ‘crime’ is always the same—being ‘different.’ Our new racism highlights cultural differences between ethnic groups by using the idea that cultural differences among European and non-European peoples makes it impossible for them to coexist in the same so-

ciety.” The same is true of the Americas, since the era of national revolutions, from the earliest to the most recent.

As Benemelis points out, none of Latin America’s revolutionary leaders—from Bolívar to Castro’s bearded revolutionaries, or the guerrillas supported by them—included Afro-American populations in their national projects—except as appendages. Even today, prominence and centrality are seen as monopolistic and match Iberian descendants, the inheritors of the colonizers and slaveowners. Any Afro-American attempt to share in that power has been seen, presented and manipulated as “reverse racism,” “self-segregation” and, most recently, as “divisionism” and “essentialism.”

The contribution of Castro-Socialism, that special, “Antillean version of Marxism” to this would be the creation of an inventive justification—a racialized *status quo*—with which to classify any black Cuban desire to share in the power as “a desire to be important” or “ideological diversionism,” declaring Cuban blacks to be “enemy agents” or “confused.” This is the contribution that other “twenty-first century Marxist” Latin Americans, and even the new, populist right, have imitated. It has been more than two decades since different generations of Cuban artists and intellectuals both in Cuba and abroad began to broach these concerns, and insist upon ideating and re-ideating Cuba. Yet, in order for this to really happen, we cannot accept the ‘national’ version of history we have been presented, because we know it has been adulterated, corrupted, invented, and is replete with silences.

It is interesting that Cubans of different chronological generations, life philosophies, political leanings and micro-cultural identifications, as well as distinct theoretical underpinnings, all essentially agree with an

idea that has even been recorded recently in a survey: “We must project the future, but also attend to the past.”³ In his entire *oeuvre*, but particularly in the 500 pages of *El miedo al negro: antropología de la colonialidad*, Dr. Juan F. Benemelis reminds us that “no one here knows that past that awaits him.”⁴

Notes:

- 1- “El ser humano siempre habita el castillo de su piel. Si el castillo está desierto, sabemos que el Diablo ha estado trabajando” [Flaming, George. *Los placeres del exilio* (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 2010): 178].
- 2- Castilla Vallejo, José Luis. “El multiculturalismo y la trampa de la cultura,” in Dacal Díaz, Ariel (coord.). *Movimientos sociales. Sujetos, articulaciones y resistencias* (La Habana: Casa Editorial Ruth, 2010): 25.
- 3- Answer of young journalist and professor Daniel Salas. “Pensar y crear desde la Revolución” [To Ideate and Create from Within the Revolution] [Survey] in *Dédalo* [Asociación Hermanos Saíz] 11 (September 2009): 11.