

Proud of Being Black

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Just like there is a day dedicated to women and another one to gays, one could consider the celebration of a Black Pride Day, just like that, nothing fancy, not a Black Citizens' Day or a Citizens of Color Day (what color?)

When beginning his presentation before the Queen of England, many years ago, a U.S. musician said: "Say it loud; I'm black and I'm proud." He then played the trumpet and sang in his inimitable gravelly voice, which shook the monarch and stiffest British aristocracy. Louis Armstrong was not considered beautiful according to Western aesthetic norms, but he was a paradigm of humanity. His art and color went hand in hand, and dignified each other equally.

What can we say about blacks who don't want to be blacks? Never mind those who want to be a *bongori* because it defines whites and blacks with good taste and genteel manners, something that would not apply to Armstrong.

It is all well and good to feel pride on account of being black, but what about a whole race being proud of each and every one of its children? The relationship amongst members of a race or ethnic group has a reciprocal effect, and affects the rest of society, too. The group projects itself outward, both as individuals and a conglomerate, and the degree to which others appreciate it somehow influences how this group's members see themselves. I would call this a 'mirror syndrome': ceasing to be one's self to avoid becoming what one reflects.

Even among blacks themselves, wooly hair (nap) is called "bad hair," just because it is too

stiff to be moved by a breeze; the darkest of our brothers is considered "a throwback," even if he's the family's only university graduate. One of my great-grandmothers who was born in Africa, had pretty dark skin, and was a free-woman, had a child—my maternal grandfather—by the master of the land on which she lived. All her girlfriends became gleeful, and sang songs to celebrate the occasion, according to African tradition: "Luisa gave birth to mulatto gentlemen, aeeh, Luisa had a mulatto." At the time, if the child had been born black like its mother, she would have been taken to have a 'dirty' womb.

Where blacks are concerned, the individual-race relationship should go beyond whatever perception others have of one and be more about how one sees one's self based on who one is, and not what one is. There are racial groups whose physical appearance does not differentiate them much (Jews and Palestinians, the English and the Irish, Spaniards and Basques, Hutus and Tutsis, etc., all over the world). Yet, despite their physical similarities, they have hated each other for centuries, for reasons spanning from religion to language to ear length, any of which can cause them to enthusiastically massacre each other with insane glee. Notwithstanding, blacks who reside outside sub-Saharan Africa are easily identifiable on account of their skin color, thick lips and stiff hair.

These unconcealable differences result in the creation of a whole series of prejudiced norms that attempt to completely qualify blacks as individuals, without considering the fact that the development of nationalities has

caused races to imitate, mix with and improve one another. Concomitantly, intermingled cultural and religious values produce a syncretic culture, one that belies any kind of discrimination.

The contribution of black people to the building of the nation is undeniable; we do not have to lower our heads in shame because there are black people who make us feel ashamed. This happens frequently with white people, too. Anti-social, unpleasant or impertinent behavior is not the purview of only one social or racial group. Cultural values, vices and provocative behavior can become commonplace, too.

As a result of the aforementioned exchange, we see white men who speak like blacks, dance the rumba and proudly show off their multicolored, African *orisha* beads, alongside black women who have had their hair painfully and chemically straightened. They are all together, all mixed up, as poet Nicolás Guillén would say, in marches, crowds and *comparsas*.

Society is rising up, like a wall constructed of multicolored bricks, and they are all indispensable. We can be proud of being indispensable. Society relies as much on its dark-skinned people as on its light-skinned ones. A black man gesticulating with his friends while speaking to them on the street corner, could be a pediatrician who just got off his shift, or a bricklayer who has just picked his grandchild up from school.

Antonio Maceo, Brindis de Salas, Jesús Menéndez, Juan Gualberto Gómez, Sara Gómez, Ignacio Villa, Celia Cruz, Benny Moré, Arsenio Rodríguez and Carlos Acosta are important figures whose visibility is acceptable to all because of the important roles they played in our country's history. Yet, there are also thousands of invisible construction workers, most of them black, who worked to build projects like the Central Highway, Capitol building, Presidential Palace, Havana Bay Tunnel, two tunnels that traverse the Almendares River, Havana's Malecón, and almost anything else that captures our attention.

In the end, it was dark-skinned arms that built the City of Havana and turned it into

a jewel of American urban architecture. The same is true for the artists and artisans who beautified and regaled the palaces and plazas of colonial and republican Cuba with their virtuosity, and for those cane cutters upon whom the country's weighty economy rested.

Who knows how long we will have to wait to teach in schools—as a required subject—the history of the contribution of black men and women to a country that belongs to all of us. We are still waiting for this wrong to be righted, for an official and public acknowledgement that instead of constituting a threat to society, Cuba's African descendants have spent their blood, sweat and talent in the building of our nation.

The paternalistic treatment the topic of slavery receives as part of a course on Cuban history is simply not enough. The image of blacks that is taught in schools has taken root in the consciousness of all Cubans, of all races, producing feelings that range from pity to disdain.

Black children grow up convinced of their little worth because they are descended from slaves, and that they have an eternal debt to the white fathers who freed them. Not only are the mis-educated with this simplistic and twisted version of history, but they are also taught a fatalistic view of life in which there is no future for them, or that they are not important, unless they are athletes or musicians. This very well could be one of the reasons that a large number of black youth don't feel motivated to pursue university degrees, or for their supposed inclination to violence and disrespect for established norms.

By now, the chains are psychological, but they are a burden, just the same. The notion of slave legacy that is taught in schools fixes in the consciousness the place each and every one of them is going to have on the social scale, a place from which they will not be able to escape. A deliberate cover-up of the reasons there are for being proud of our race, and a concomitant insistence upon paternalistic tolerance by those who are economically dominant, is an example of racism.