

Criollo supremacy's Last Alibi

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There is exhaustive evidence that Cuba's leaders have no political or intellectual response to the ever more complex race problem, a problem that is sowing trauma and vagueness about the present and future of our country. The authorities are pressured by our convulsive, socioeconomic reality and feel trapped by the social fissures and dysfunction that the growing disadvantages of black Cubans have created. They also feel the stress created by internal and external debates, and uncertainties, and by the weight of so many errors and excesses committed against the image and rights of black and *mestizo* Cubans for as long as they have been in power.

The television program "Universidad para todos" [University for all] aired the course "Los que pensaron a Cuba" [Those Who Ideated Cuba], an episode that could easily be titled "Los que pensaron su Cuba" [Those Who Ideated Their Own Cuba], because it reproduces traditional patterns of exclusion and disdain that have systematically made invisible the enormous role and contribution of Africans and their descendants to the economic, political, social and cultural shaping of the Cuba we know. Once again, the course obviated the many processes and projects that emerged borne of the socio-political thought and action of Afro-descendant Cubans. These have been important milestones for our historical development.

The course's curricular content made no reference to José Antonio Aponte's movement. It was the first, anti-colonial and anti-slavery movement in 1812. Neither did it make mention of

the Independent Party of Color (1908-1912), or the Afro-Feminist movement, or the political thought of Antonio Maceo, Juan Gualberto Gómez, Rafael Serra, Martín Morúa Delgado, Evarist Estenoz, Pedro Ivonet, Ramón Vasconcelos, Sandalio Junco or many union leaders.

Now there is new course airing: "Presencia negra en la cultura cubana" [The Black Presence in Cuban Culture]. The first noteworthy thing is that "the black presence" is once again separated from the assumed references regarding the political and intellectual building of the Cuban nation. What are we referring to when we speak of a "black presence"? In addition to being a continued colonial reference, one that converted the adjective (black) into a noun describing a discriminated entity, it also, once again, reveals the panic generated by the term "Afro-descendant," which gives political and cultural legitimacy to those of us who have traditionally been disdained.

Yet, beyond all the semantic vices a very well ensconced, racist psychology finds or reaffirms, the resulting arguments and concepts used by those in power and via pro-government academe to terribly twist all our history and favor the traditionally colonial mentality embraced by supremacists and victims alike, is extremely worrisome.

This television course once again reaffirms the argument that the battlefields of our independence wars, especially those of the 1895-1898 war, became a birthplace and paradise of racial harmony. Furthermore, it reasserts that it

was the Americans who brought racism to Cuba during their occupation (1899-1920).

This aberration is nothing new. Last year, in commemoration of the hundredth anniversary of the massacre of the Independent Party of Color (1908-1912), a number of academics and writers said as much, explaining it was something more to add to the long list of distortions and omissions too common to Cuba's official historiography. Yet, in this case, I am not talking about an academic debate or poorly written book like *La conspiración de iguales* [The Conspiracy of Equals], by official historian Rolando Rodríguez. Instead, it is about the gravity of the fact that this information is shared via a space that is supposedly meant to fill in the lacunae and gaps in our knowledge of Cuba's real history. Instead, what it does is reaffirm a version that is entirely divorced from reality on a program that could raise consciousness about the truth of the African and Afro-descendant contribution to Cuba.

Once again, this makes it abundantly clear that *criollo* elite's racist supremacy can change its ideological rhetoric and trappings, but it will always find alibis and explanations with which to distort reality. Their purpose, of course, is to protect and keep intact the colonial patterns and references that have always marked our social relations for centuries.

Not satisfied with giving continuity to and confirming these institutionalized distortions that misrepresent or omit historical references to so many great Afro-descendants who left their mark and legacy on Cuba's history, now they are attempting to craft an intellectual rhetoric to try to erase visceral racism in white men who descend from Spaniards, are heterosexual and Catholic, and have had hegemonic control over spaces of power for more than two centuries.

At this moment, these very same *criollo* supremacists, now dressed as revolutionaries,

are trying to erase with the stroke of a pen the historical evidence of so many obstacles created by the so-called "fear of blacks" that took hold during the independence struggles of the nineteenth century. They are not acknowledging that this fear, which seems to be alive and well even now, was not a fear of the assumed violence of Afro-descendants, but of the panic their talent, intelligence, work ethic, valor and likeability generated and apparently still foments. It was all these things that allowed Africans and their descendants to achieve notable economic, social, political, intellectual and cultural advances, despite the very difficult conditions that racist discrimination and exclusion imposed on their social coexistence way before the *Maine* blew up, Admiral Cervera's armada was defeated, or General Calixto García responded with only a useless letter to the humiliation that occurred when Mambi soldiers were not permitted to enter Santiago de Cuba in 1898.

At this stage of the game, it is shameful and unforgivable to ignore that the very same racism that existed within the inner workings of the independence movement for a long time has been an obstacle to Cuba achieving real and complete nationhood. For the very necessary acknowledgment of our true history as an essential building block in our effort to achieve justice and integration, it is bad news that the Cuban government continues to distort our past and present reality.

Our leaders do not seem disposed to fulfill their responsibility to establish the cultural and institutional underpinnings that will create—in practice—the equality that they hypocritically proclaim in their rhetoric. To keep Cuban Afro-descendants in a position of virtual inferiority, they will continue to avail themselves of methods like manipulating the truth and new alibis that will guarantee absolute power and tranquility to that racist supremacy that for all intents and purposes defies time and ideologies.