

## **Blackness, Cubanness, and the End of an Era**

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### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to demonstrate the importance of examining racial inequalities in today's Cuban society. When the Island is clearly in the verge of experiencing fundamental transformations, it is more than ever necessary to study the basic mechanism underpinning the pervasiveness of racial prejudices and racism against Black Cubans both on the Island and within its exiled communities. How can the current negotiations between the Cuban and US government impact everyday lives of Black Cubans?

The avalanche has not stopped. News about Cuba and its future keeps coming, each day more and more, since December 17th, 2014. A “miraculous” day, many thought, when, coincidentally with the celebration of San Lázaro—one of the most popular and revered saints for Cubans—Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro announced mutual intentions to reestablish the relationship between Cuba and the United States. Public reactions have been multiple and both superficial and deep analyses are not scarce; while speculations proliferate through the press, social media, as well as in entrepreneurial circles and throughout the academic milieu.

Most of these accounts and debates fluctuate between two strong positions: one adopts a utopian vision of the Cuban future, where a new Island with plenty of possibilities, a promised

land for tourists and entrepreneurs, all smiling, is waiting for us as the bright happy ending of the slow series of negotiations between Washington and Havana. Against this position are naturally the pessimists, those who view the political and economic thaw as a betrayal—from one side of the battlefield or the other. For them, the latest events represent either the US or Cuban government's obliteration of history and an offensive disregard of the "prowess" of those in Cuba and in exile that have managed to keep alive the unending confrontation between supporters and opposers of the revolution. The most orthodox sectors of the Cuban regime interpret the reconciliation with the United States as the definitive disappearance of the vestiges of an egalitarian system and the subsequent victory of brutal Capitalism; while numerous members of the exiled Cuban community consider it as the fatal acknowledgement of the Castrist regime by the American government.

Both optimists and pessimists share however a similar perception of Cuba as an island frozen in time: kept in ages that are constantly recalled by the Chevrolets and Fords still running through a capital whose buildings are also survivors of colonial times and of a glamorous Art Deco era. An island that also seems plunged in its ideological past, as one of the last remnants of the extinct socialist system that, at least symbolically, collapsed with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. However, the very sense of ruin, of survival over time, can ultimately remind us that Cuba could be all but a nation frozen in time. Furthermore, Cuba has never been frozen in time, because the Island has existed under an omnipresent yet surreptitious and unfinished war. It's "la lucha," as Cubans call their everyday desperate hustle to find the means to improve their lives: whether it is by operating a lucrative business, landing a good job, migrating to a wealthier country, or simply finding, under the heat of a yearlong summer, in the chaotic and impoverished Cuban cities and towns, food items to prepare a decent meal, much needed medicines, some

hope! The idea of the Island frozen in time thus fails to recognize real Cuban life, the world of the *luchadores*.

Accordingly, not enough public attention has been paid to the increase of inequalities in today's Cuban society, even though, since the 1990s, well renowned scholars such as sociologist Mayra Espina have consistently studied the progressive widening of the socioeconomic gap, while several writers have incorporated the *luchadores* into their literary work, sometimes even ad nauseam. How can we forget Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's depictions of Centro Habana's marginal population in his 1998 *Trilogía sucia de La Habana* [*Dirty Havana Trilogy*]?:

Cada día me parezco más a los negros del solar: sin nada que hacer, sentados en la acera, intentando sobrevivir vendiendo unos panecillos, un jabón, o unos tomates. Así día a día. Sin pensar en qué haremos mañana, qué sucederá. Se sientan en la acera con un jabón en la mano, o con dos cajas de cigarrillos y dejan que pase el día. Y sobreviven. Los días pasan. (1998, p. 160)

Every day I'm more like the blacks who live in the projects: they sit on the sidewalk with nothing to do, trying to survive by selling a few rolls of bread, a bar of soap, a few tomatoes. It's like this day after day. Never thinking what will we do tomorrow, what will happen next. They sit on the sidewalk with a bar of soap in one hand, or two packs of cigarettes, letting the day slip by. And they just keep living. And the days pass. (2001, p. 160)

Drawn from more recently published works, we can also cite the litanic complaints of inspector Mario Conde, the sometimes tiresome main character of Leonardo Padura's police saga, who, in the novel *La neblina del ayer* [*Havana Fever*] finds himself estranged from his city when he visits a poor neighborhood and is surprised by its devastation:

Mientras el Palomo acordaba con dos negros de aspecto carcelario el precio por el cuidado de su auto, el Conde cruzó la calle, evitando un charco donde flotaba una rata hinchada, y les compró a los chinos cuatro laticas de pomada. Desde allí observó el panorama que lo circundaba y le recordó ciertas imágenes de ciudades africanas vistas en la televisión. Es el regreso a los orígenes, pensó, preparándose para sorpresas mayores. (2005, p. 141)

While Palomo agreed on a price for protecting his car with two black guys who looked like ex-convicts, the Count crossed the Street, sidestepping a swollen rat

floating in a puddle, and bought four tins of pomade at ten pesos a piece from the Chinamen. He surveyed the scene and was reminded of images of African cities he'd seen on television. A return to our origins, he thought, as he geared himself up for the bigger shocks in store. (2009, p. 113)

Both characters coincide, in their descriptions of current Havana's decay, in linking depravation and poverty to Blackness. Their association, whereas tainted by racial prejudices, is not completely fictional. This is neither a surprise nor a fantasy: Blacks are the majority of the population in the poorest strati of today's Cuban society, as well as in the Island's prisons. Conversely, Blacks are almost invisible among the wealthiest sectors, which are mostly composed of the owners of rental properties, restaurants, and other small businesses legalized through the reforms implemented since the beginning of the tenure of current president Raúl Castro in 2006.

The new economic reforms, while encouraging small business entrepreneurship, have also promoted the ostensible rise of a wealthier class on the Island. There is however a pertinent question: who are those Cubans that are able to open restaurants and hostels and keep them efficiently working? In many cases, the capital is provided by relatives or friends, mostly through the system of remittances (legal money transfers) or *mulas* (an informal system to send money to the Island from abroad). As explained by Hansing and Optenhögel (2015), “[l]os cubanos que son pobres, que no cuentan con remesas familiares y que no disponen de capital social o político quedan automáticamente excluidos de los ‘beneficios’ de las reformas” ‘Poor Cubans who do not receive remittances and are deprived of political or social capital, are automatically excluded from the economic reform’s “benefits”’ (p. 12). The authors continue by acknowledging that Blacks are less likely to receive substantial remittances, since the majority of wealthy exiled Cubans, who are able to consistently and regularly support their relatives on the Island, are

White. Thoroughly studied since the early 2000s by scholars such as Alejandro de la Fuente (2001, pp. 319–326) and Susan Eckstein (2004, p. 342), among others; today, the economic disadvantages experienced by the majority of Black Cubans is an undeniable reality, clearly visible as one visits the Island and discovers that neither the owners nor the clients of the most profitable businesses in Cuba are not usually Blacks. In many cases, they are simply unable to afford the pricey entrees displayed in the menus, or they just don't possess appropriate clothes to wear in these new places, where customers might sometimes wonder if they are sitting at a table in Miami Beach or in Havana's wealthy neighborhoods of Vedado or Miramar.

The scope of racial inequalities in today's Cuban socioeconomic stratification has been lucidly depicted by Espina and Rodríguez in this excerpt of their study:

Las desigualdades de raza se verifican en diferentes aspectos: la mayor presencia de trabajadores blancos en actividades ventajosas (turismo, empresas mixtas); el predominio de negros y mestizos en actividades de la industria y la construcción del sector tradicional; la mayor presencia de blancos en los grupos socioocupacionales calificados y de trabajo intelectual en el sector emergente; el aumento de la proporción de blancos en la medida que se asciende en el nivel de dirección; la concentración de las remesas familiares en la población blanca; la sobrerrepresentación de la población negra y mestiza en las viviendas más desfavorecidas. Y también se comprueba en el predominio, en las representaciones raciales, de una evaluación negativa hacia los negros y una positiva hacia los blancos, lo que opera como un factor de reproducción a escala simbólica de las desigualdades.

Racial inequalities have become evident in several aspects of Cuban reality: the majority presence of White employees in the most lucrative areas (such as tourism and joint-venture businesses); in the predominance of Blacks and Mestizos working in the industrial and the construction of sectors of traditional society; the predominance of Whites in more socially and occupationally qualified groups and in the intellectual work of the emergent sector; the increase of the proportion of Whites in labor in which they are able to be promoted to the level of management; the concentration of the reception of remittances within the White population; and the over-representation of Blacks in the most impoverished neighborhoods. Also, negative evaluations of Blacks and positive evaluations of Whites prevail in racial representations; and this operates as a factor in the reproduction—at a symbolic level—of inequalities. (as cited in Espina, 2008, p. 139)

Racial inequalities are hence an incontestable reality in today's Cuban society, provoked by a variety of socioeconomic, cultural, and ethical factors. It is in addition worth noting the fact, as remarked by Hansing and Optenhögel (2015, p. 12), that the State has not been able to properly address this critical situation. No policy to protect the most vulnerable sectors of society has been designed by the government and, consequently, a substantial group of marginalized Black Cubans has had no alternative but to resort to illegal activities such as prostitution and the Black market in order to survive. Rampant poverty, delinquency, and the subsequent social criminalization and police harassment of the Black population is linked to the open exhibition of preexisting racial prejudices.

This problem has been aggravated in the present; and the forecast for the years to come can be disheartening: the reestablishment of economic relations between Cuba and the United States and the lift of the embargo might result in an escalation of the already severe racial inequalities. As the Cuban economy becomes more liberalized and private initiatives are increasingly encouraged, it is plausible to expect that the social divide will also widen further. However, the current situation may have only unveiled and refueled racial problems that have never truly disappeared from Cuban society, but persisted as a constitutive part of everyday life on the Island—as well as within its diasporic and exiled communities. Since the 1960s, when the revolutionary government implemented several policies intended to eradicate all kinds of social inequalities, racial prejudices and racism remained latent in Cuba, though circumscribed to the privacy of domestic sites and intimate contexts.

For many, this is a striking paradox.

How it can be explained that, after more than 50 years of communist rule, racism against Blacks is still present in Cuban society? Wasn't the Cuban revolution and the communist regime

supposed to bring racial inequalities—and all kinds of inequalities—to an end? And, furthermore, how does one understand this paradoxical pervasiveness of racial prejudices, across centuries, in a post-revolutionary society culturally and ethnically marked by *mestizaje*?

Answers might arise from understanding, first, that prejudices against Black Cubans are not only determined by the economic stratification of the society. It is thus imperative to understand their systemic and multidimensional character, to better deconstruct the machinery supporting racial disparities in Cuba. Neither abolition in 1886, nor independence in 1902, nor the triumph of the revolution of 1959, with its egalitarian policies that have offered all Cubans equal access to high quality health care, education, culture, housing, and employment, have succeeded in eradicating racial inequality. Its resurgence, with the crisis of the 1990s, reenergized the debate on the pervasiveness of racial prejudices in a post-revolutionary society; a debate previously silenced by the government, which had supposedly abolished all disparities.

In the context of this ongoing debate, animated on the Island by renowned Cuban scholars such as Gisela Arandia, Graciela Chailloux, Tomás Fernández Robaina, Alejandro de la Fuente, Inés María Martiatu, Esteban Morales, Zuleika Romay, Daysi Rubiera Castillo, and Roberto Zurbano, among others, I argue that the perception shared by the majority of Cubans of all races of a stereotyped Blackness, interpreted as a sign of otherness and as something external to an allegedly authentic national identity, underpins today's persistence of racial prejudices.<sup>1</sup> It is thus necessary to examine the main features of the construction of Blackness as otherness in Cuban contemporary society. When one attempts to do so, a central question arises: how have Cubans interpreted Blackness within the cosmology of the Cuban Revolution?

With the concept of the cosmology of the Cuban Revolution, I refer to the set of ideas and affects, conditioned by the revolutionary experience, that sustained post-revolutionary Cuban

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<sup>1</sup> See an exhaustive account of contemporary racial debates in Cuba in Zurbano (2014).

existence in emotional and rational terms (Casamayor, 2013, pp. 32–35). Although rooted in the 19th-century independence struggle, the cosmology of the Cuban revolution took shape during the 1960s and 1970s, in the context of the Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961, the Missile Crisis one year later, and the series of repeated counterrevolutionary attacks. Its existential framework implies the need to establish a national consensus, crucial to understanding race and gender politics in the Cuban Revolution. That is, the government interpreted the struggle against racial discrimination as imperative for maintaining national unity and consequently strengthening Cuba in the face of counterrevolutionary aggressions. Fidel Castro clearly expressed this in March of 1959: “We are a small nation of people who rely on one another; we rely on the efforts of everyone together, yet we are going to divide ourselves now in Blacks and Whites? ... What purpose does that serve but to weaken the nation, to weaken Cuba?” (as cited in Fernández Robaina, 1994, p. 185).

The obliteration of racial identification under the mythic weight of a sacred concept of nationhood is deeply rooted in the Island’s history. Having adopted the model of the nation laid out by José Martí—the ideologue of Cuban Independence, apostle of the nation during the republic (1902–1958), and later a national hero following the revolutionary triumph of 1959—the Cuban Revolution assumes that, in every citizen, national identification prevails over any other form of identity.<sup>2</sup> Seemingly, when racial segregation was officially ended in 1959, ethnic heterogeneity ceased to be a source of conflict, since difference was supposed to be diluted within the Cuban masses facing a common enemy (the United States) and sharing a single tradition, immersed together in a single, well-defined future: the construction of tropical socialism.

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<sup>2</sup> These historical processes have been studied by de la Fuente (2001), Ferrer (1999), and Guerra (2012); while relevant analyses of José Martí’s racial perspective can be found in Camacho (2007) and Morán (2014).



But, today, the *evil*, that capitalism that Cuban revolutionary leaders addressed in each speech and every decision, the confrontational specter that continuously supported—by opposition—the very existence of the revolution, is fading. The United States is beginning to cease to be considered a phantasmagorical enemy and is becoming an actual, heavy presence (maybe, after all, the real monster that was feared for so long). If the current negotiations between the United States and Cuba succeed and both nations reach a state of friendship and cooperation, or at least cohabitation, there would be no need to erect an anachronic Cubanness to survive the imperialist threat. And once the imperative of preserving a solid national cohesion against the “enemy” vanishes, what ideological excuse would keep Black Cubans from expressing their own racial concerns, presenting their own agenda, rethinking the nation in their own terms?

Cubans are imminently under the challenge of reinventing new strategies of identification. This is a unique moment in which it would be worth it to openly express our experience as Black Cubans, to accept and talk about the real scars, still present in our existence, left by the historic experience of slavery, segregation, and present-day discrimination and racial prejudice. It is necessary to bring into the light of day a debate always muzzled in Cuba—since the infamous 1912 Massacre of the Partido Independiente de Color—and to finally discuss the reasons and mechanisms through which Cuban hegemonic circles have succeed for more than a century to avoid the effective agency of Blacks on the Island, in the republic era as well as during the revolutionary period. The idea of Cubanness—to which all other identifications are subsumed—wasn’t drawn by Black poor Cubans but by White patricians *criollos* in the 19th century.

We should, for instance, go and read again and publicly discuss that brief but fundamental book written in 1961 by Black Cuban intellectual and communist Walterio Carbonell, *Cómo surgió la cultura nacional*. Banned by the revolutionary authorities, his work exposed the racism underlying the thought by prominent ideologues of the Cuban nation, such as José A. Saco, Francisco Arango y Parreño, or José de la Luz y Caballero. Only fear—conscious or unconscious—of missing White privilege, that is, the benefits acquired for the sole reason of not being a Black person in a society always dominated by the Eurocentrist hegemony, is behind the avoidance to discuss these critical questions about Blackness in Cuba.

However, we, Black Cubans, rather than dissolving our energies in plaintive and cathartic explosions and succumbing within the analgesic drama flooding our present day, should fearlessly assume our agency. Finding strength in our Black scars, we can—and we must—participate in the current reinvention of Cubanness. It is time to explicitly acknowledge our racial identity as much as we acknowledge our national identity, rather than consider it a suppressed condition. And that time is now, when we must reach, as Blacks citizens, the political and civic arena—whether it is on the Island or abroad—representing our very own programs. It is time for demanding the implementation of policies intended to protect vulnerable Black communities. Time to tell and write our intimate history and make it public. Time to penetrate the Cuban educational system with our own voices.

Our time is, always, now!

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