

Cuba y el Colorismo: El Socialismo es un Sueño Fallido de Equidad
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Cuba's pride in the Revolution of 1959 is immediately evident as it is an inescapable topic of discussion in literary forms, conversations with locals, music, and art. Cuban lecturers repeated similar stories of a 'before and after' 1959 and provided impressive statistics and stories of mostly achieved racial equity in educational, political, and health outcomes. Socialism has been posited by many (Dominguez, 2013), including the lecturers, as the institutional remedy to racism. Cuba's socialist economic system was burdened and undermined by imperialism and its far-reaching influence, instigating a survival tactic: the accommodation of a capitalist-based private tourism sector.

To stem unrest, the government ordered the economy split into two sectors: one for private businesses and foreign-oriented enterprises... But the economic divergence created two contrasting realities that persist today. The first is that of white Cubans, who have leveraged their resources to enter the new market-driven economy and reap the benefits of a supposedly more open socialism. The other reality is that of the black plurality, which witnessed the demise of the socialist utopia from the island's least comfortable quarters. (Zurbano, 2013)

The politics of race and economic opportunities are often bundled in a way that is fair, just, and understandable. However, as evidenced by the silence and false promise within the Second Declaration of Havana (Dominguez, 2013), a society cannot legislate its way out of tightly held and intergenerationally inherited prejudiced beliefs based on skin tone. Cuba, as the second-to-last Western country to abolish slavery, benefitted from bonded labor and white supremacy. This history, while reckoned with by some Cubans and institutions organized and embedded the pursuant and persisting inequities—particularly seen now in the burgeoning private sector—experienced by the two Cubas (white and Black). The tale of two Cubas is of

course utilizing the framework coined by U.S. Senator John Edwards during his campaign trail when he ran for President in 2004 (Democratic National Convention, 2008). The two countries, while immensely different in critical aspects—education, culture, health care systems, governance—bear a striking resemblance in terms of racism (U.S.) and colorism (Cuba). Because no statistical information related to employment, education, or even population demographics by race/skin color are available on any internet platform, a large portion of this paper will rely on anecdotal or secondary sources for analytical discussion.

This paper will first address colonialism and its persisting impacts and influence on skin tone differences and accompanying inequities. Next, Cuba’s false promise and subsequent silence on issues of colorism will be elaborated upon. Following, the United States and Cuba will be compared in regard to its historical and current unrest regarding racism/colorism. Lastly, the author will offer recommendations for relief and deliberate parity between whites and non-whites in Cuba and the United States.

From Cuban Apologies and to Thunderous Denial

Historical Cuba

The trail of destruction blazed into the collective psyche, folklore, inherited trauma, imagination, history, and socialization processes by the atrocity of the enslavement of African peoples is ever-enduring and strategically reformulated by its benefactors. This invites a central question when analyzing racial development, collectively and individually, “how does it feel to be a problem” (DuBois, 1903). Can a country whose economic viability relied heavily on labor from kidnapped, trafficked, and enslaved persons achieve redemption for their prior social sins? What would that look like? While Cuba has a relatively short slave-free epoch—since 1886 (Bergad, 2017)—its historical treatment of Afro-Cubans and enslaved Africans certainly makes

post-Revolution efforts to curb colorism seem utopian in comparison to the United States.

However, better by comparison does not equate to a harmonious or utopian status of Black v. white Cubans on the island. Cubans seem willing to discuss their history of accepting massive numbers of slaves and verbal atonement through such projects as the Fort of Matanzas.

Colonizers and the colonized. Abbreviated timeline of colonization in Cuba (BBC News, 2018):

Table 1

Claimed by Spain in 1492
Slaves began arriving in Cuba in 1526
The British seize Havana in 1762, but returned to Spain in 1763 Treaty of Paris
First war of Independence fought from 1868-78
Slavery is finally abolished in 1886
Second war of Independence led by Jose Marti launched in 1895
U.S. defeats Spain in war in 1898 and claims Cuba
Cuba wins independence and elects first President in 1902; Platt Amendment means U.S. can intervene in Cuban affairs
Due to Cuban President's resignation, U.S. occupies Cuba from 1906-09
Second Cuban President elected in 1909, U.S. leaves
U.S. returns to help the Cuban government murder many Black revolutionaries protesting against Cuban discrimination
U.S. announces it will no longer intervene in Cuban affairs in 1934

Colonization not only dictated future dynamics between darker and lighter skin Cubans, but it served as the seedlings for intergenerational resentment or feeling of superiority for respective Black and white Cubans. Cuba's participation in the slave trade was massive. To illustrate the magnitude of Cuba's slave trade: neighboring Puerto Rico exploited 51,265 slaves at its peak while Cuba's peak was 370,553 slaves—a 300,00+ difference. Factors such as island size and export capabilities could explain some of the difference. Nevertheless, the vast difference becomes increasingly uncomfortable when one considers that slaves in Cuba were not

just working the sugarcane and coffee farms but were embedded in nearly every opportunity for indentured labor within its society (Bergad, 2017). This can be interpreted as a moral decision which extends beyond economics. This reality paired with the late date of slavery abolishment confirms the feelings reported by some Black Cubans, that a colonialist past created and socialism over-promises have maintained discriminatory micro-practices which have led to the whitening of the academy and the new and prosperous private market, both of which report an overrepresentation of white Cubans as beneficiaries (A. Garcia, personal communication, 2019; Cave, 2016; Zurbano, 2013).

The colonized are an integral aspect of this formula due to the possibility of internalized colorism and prejudiced thoughts, which can lead to horizontal oppression. Horizontal oppression is doing the master's work for them, but as a result we can also begin to understand the concept of learned helplessness as a result of internalized oppression (Patel, 2011). Although it is dangerous to superimpose such victimhood onto Black or mestizo Cubans, it is integral to also provide some understanding into the psyche and reasoning for why not all who are Black, or mestizo would assess Cuba as having a color problem.

Contemporary Cuba

Silence is a word that captures the contemporary response to questions about race and ethnicity in Cuba. During the author's trip to Cuba, nearly every lecturer—all of whom were white or light skin Cubans—dodged the questions about skin color outcomes and considerations. Cuba, who once proclaimed socialism to be atonement for its colonialist past, now claims that socialism and its corresponding policies eliminated color-based prejudice and social problems (Dominguez, 2013). While color-based discrimination is outlawed in Cuba—and in the U.S.—its legality is not and will never be an indicator of the microcosm of human to human and family to

family interactions that comprise our society. In other words, policies and laws that protect people from institutional discrimination are well-intended, but a failure on their own as the institutions are comprised of the individuals whose beliefs and perceptions cannot be legislated out of existence. Socialism as a cure for wealth inequality is great framework but lacks the ability to account for the separate issue of race. Racism and colorism precede economic inequality as income inequality is built on the back of racism and colorism; racism and colorism are not built on the back of income inequality.

The denial and silence on behalf of Cuba and its Party leaders means that its colorism will remain steadily unchecked and unaddressed within the micro, mezzo, and macro spheres. One of the major impacts on color inequity is exclusion from the growing private market in Cuba: tourism in particular. Silence and denial are akin to race-neutrality (formerly known as colorblindness but updated so as to avoid ableist language) in the United States.

Similar to white flight in the United States in the 1950s and beyond, is the white elite Cuban exodus after the Revolution triumphed in 1959 (Pedraza, 1998). In the second migration wave, more white Cubans fled. In the third wave, many formerly incarcerated Black and mestizo Cubans took a chance on starting a new life in the United States. This is significant, as the white elite Cubans were able to start businesses in the United States or find work that allowed them to save for themselves, while also sending money back to their families in Cuba after remittance sanctions were relaxed upon the fall of the USSR. The private and private/state sectors are growing and represent approximately 29% of the job market in Cuba (Cruz & Alvarez, n.d.). This debatably incompatible sector is based in the free market, i.e. capitalism. To enter the free market, one must have access to start-up capital. The white families in Cuba who have been receiving remittances are in a much better position to enter the market. With enough money they

could open a bed and breakfast, a restaurant, and/or purchase and maintain those fancy older cars tourists like. It was discussed within lectures how folks working in the private sector are earning more money than those who work for the government, even within a prestigious role such as a physician.

One longer passage in particular urges the reader to analyze the intention behind Fidel's insistence upon racism being driven out by socialism (D'Amato, 2007). The passage discusses Cuba's intentional decentering of whiteness, and instead moving towards centering Africanhood and Blackness as a response to the United States' race issues, because Fidel (correctly) believed that American culture centers whiteness (Dominguez, 2013).

Changing the tropes of national identity from white to black involved actively replacing or enhancing the powerful icons and symbols of the nation in such a way as to be inclusive of all elements of the population. These symbols were affected by an external projection of Cuba as an Afro-Latin country, which would precipitate an internal shift of claiming blackness through mulattoization. This process of transformation the paradigm of whiteness to one of blackness involved four key steps. The first was a reconstruction of the experience of black enslavement through a revolutionary lens (Adams 2001). The second was recapturing the image of "criollo mulato" that had been proposed by the Afro-Negristas in the 1930s (de la Fuente 1998). The third strategy involved educating and creating national pride in the historical black figures of Cuba's past (de la Fuente 1998). Finally, imperialism, racism, and anti-revolutionary sentiment were linked to whiteness in contrast to the association of blackness with revolution, antiracism, and socialism. These four steps, taken collectively, were to further incorporate the ideology of mulattoization into the national consciousness. (Wells, 1992, p. 174)

Fidel's actions require us to ascertain whether the verbal atonement—devoid of individual reparations, it should be noted—paired with the institutional relief but not history-informed barrier relief all amounts to symbolic support to pad socialism's 'success'. Contemporary Cuba does not reckon with colorism, as it seems to believe that all Cubans are equal due to their 'equal' access to health care and education. This, of course, mirrors some of America's faulty logic in relation to race; it becomes clear that the motivation for both countries to avoid race/colorism is precisely to bolster its own fraudulent self-image.

United States Race Problem

Historical & Current Similarities

As noted throughout this document, American and Cuban social attitudes and governmental responses are similar, but as reflected in the last section the intentions on behalf of both countries appear to be indistinguishable. Like Cuba, the United States also participated in the slave trade, even though the country abolished it twenty years before Cuba. While Cuba attempts to rectify their wrongs in the slave trade by sending Cuban physicians to African countries for missions, the United States refuses to pursue anything resembling an apology or reparations. The United States has a sordid history with Black folks as evidenced in the era of reconstruction, then Jim Crow, and now with the war on drugs and resulting mass incarceration. Slavery has simply evolved and gone underground, as America continues to struggle to come to terms with how 200 years of slavery shapes culture, families, and society.

Cuba's failed promise that socialism would eradicate racism/colorism mirrors the United States promise that people are all "created equal," (Declaration of Independence, 1776, paragraph 2). As a testament to governmental ego, both countries seemingly would rather avoid the topic or point to legal protections of people of color (or other marginalized groups) to

demonstrate that their country is free from these tremendously individual and intergenerational lessons. In the United States, denial is more evident than silence, especially since the election of President Obama in 2008; his election reaffirmed to many white folks that racism was over and promoted race-neutrality. Since then and with the election of President Trump, the conversation around race has become more contentious, with conservative whites denying racism exists, and instead asserting that people of color have more advantages (Chow, 2018). As Bryan Stevenson discusses, the United States cannot forge a path towards racial unity until it admits its wrongs, asks for forgiveness, and ensures that the country never forgets or buries its history (2014). Affirmative action and quota systems are well-intended and can work, but studies show they tend to benefit white women (Crenshaw, 2006). The same is true of public assistance programs (Chow, 2018).

The similarities include demographical statistics within the academy; approximately 80% of professorships in Cuba and the United States are held by whites (Cave, 2016). Another similarity, approximately 70% of all elected officials are white, while the United States' rate of white elected officials is 88% (Lardieri, 2017). Like in Cuba, discrimination based on race or ethnicity is illegal, however, many American Black folks and Black Cubans report microaggressions (Bates, 2017; Zurbano, 2013). Both countries err in reporting that they are a post-racial society based on these often and easily violated laws. Policy must be augmented to close the gaps.

Policy Recommendations for Cuba and the U.S.

1. Embed non-whitewashed history education on slavery and its permutations thereof, microaggressions, and white/light skin biases and privileges and how to leverage those within society to interrupt the normalization of white supremacy. This education should

begin at least in 1st grade to normalize the language, concepts, and inform individual and collective race development. Altering the curriculum in the United States is a difficult task which usually involves gubernatorial intervention, as was recently seen with the inclusion of LGBT history within the public school (Adely, 2019). It is likely that curriculum is adaptable by the Minister of Education in Cuba. The strength in this recommendation is that it is debatably less controversial than the addition of LGBT history.

2. Reparations in the form of money and/or land conferment for all Cuban and American Blacks who are African descendants. This is incredibly unlikely in the United States, given that many white folks already believe people of color have more advantages (Chow, 2018), and it would require the disproportionate number of whites (Lardieri, 2017) in elected official capacity to vote in support of such a measure. With the right communications campaign, this measure is more likely to succeed—or at least some variation thereof—in Cuban Parliament. The strength within the United States, is 2020 Presidential candidates have discussed reparations, when just years ago no serious candidate would have even addressed it; it is a less foreign concept.
3. The redevelopment and legal protections of quota systems and affirmative action in employment, higher education, elected official capacity, and bureaucratic government. In the United States, existing affirmative action policies have been challenged (Busta, 2018), and quota systems have been deemed illegal (Walesby, 2010) which renders this a challenging project; however, it is likely that with a more progressive Supreme Court and Executive Administration, affirmative action policies could be strengthened towards a truer quota system. Cuba is perfectly aligned to introduce this proposed policy as higher

education is already free for all Cubans; nevertheless, other social barriers for Black/white parity outcomes would need addressed, such as the aforementioned issue with white Cubans enjoying more economic resources. Affirmative action and quota policies are wedded to another component necessary to ensure a fairer shot at dignity and economic security, which is the next recommendation.

4. Free or substantially reduced higher education based on race/skin tone for families who make less than \$250k/year. The income criteria are higher so as to allow Black families to continue to build wealth; Black families should not have to choose between wealth accumulation or sending their children to college. In the United States, this is a topic of discussion on the 2020 Presidential campaign trail, albeit not focused on race, but rather viewing education as a human right; it is not a foreign concept. This recommendation does not apply to Cuba as written because of the country's wonderful and free higher education system. Cuba, however, could address the aforementioned barriers to achieving Black/white Cuban parity such as: demographic-matched mentoring, transportation, competing needs/challenges, lack of professors who resemble Black students, and additional tutoring or individualized testing to gain admission to the school program of their choice.
5. Government investment into Black mental health services and financial incentives to account for their lost wages for Black folks who consume these services. Over time, racism and colorism can and often do impact the mental and physical well-being of the targets (Paradies et al., 2015). Clients must be matched with providers who look like them, unless asked otherwise by the client. This will provide Black mental health providers with expanded employment opportunities, while ensuring clients receive

increased cultural competence through the use of demographic-matching. In the United States, this recommendation could gain traction with some elected officials, and potentially be piloted with the assistance of larger research universities/institutions. Should the findings be positive, it would increase the potential for CDC backing and legislative support. Due to Cuba's healthcare system, this could be adapted to provide incentives for Black Cubans to address the potential impacts of prolonged exposure to microaggressions and prejudice.

Conclusion

If you don't deal with "skin color" as what it is, a historical variable of social differentiation among Cubans, you could forget that blacks, whites, and mestizos did not start from the same place in taking advantage of the opportunities the Revolution provided. So it was overlooked that many of the poor were black, which represents an additional disadvantage, even within present-day Cuban society. (Dominguez, 2013, p. 22).

The astonishing silence and cowardly denial of color-based oppression and discrimination in Cuba and the United States is harrowingly disappointing. As discussed throughout this paper, socialism—a response to capitalism, not racism—falls short of the promise given by the Revolution: that racism was eliminated. While institutionalized forms of discrimination have been eradicated, the interpersonal relationships and beliefs held by those that comprise these institutions are left unchecked; this is true for Cuba and the United States. Both countries appear to cling to race-neutrality because it suits them—it is the easier thing to do if you are privileged—and it aids their paternal and elitist grandiosity in relation to one another. Cuba's centering of Africanhood is a farce and childish retaliation to counter the centering of

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whiteness by its adversary, the United States. This leaves Black folks in a familiar place, a pawn of whiteness and all of its destruction in the name of self-preservation and ego.

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