

Strange Fruits: The Cuban Halloween Harvest of 2022

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*A photo of three young men disguised as members of the Ku Klux Klan the night of this past Halloween at a park in Holguin, Cuba, went viral on social media, setting off widespread criticism. The incident is part of a larger process which, away from all the agitation, I attempt to explain here.*

Racism is not a ghost that travels the world. It is an invisible factory of stereotypes, exclusions, and deep wounds inflicted on a significant part of humanity. It is not simply aversion but a social machine that, in any of the circumstances in which it happens, thinks, subjugates and punishes in either subtle or violent ways. It widely traverses philosophies and cultures. In Cuba, racism hid in the same way that disabled children, political deserters and unfaithful women were kept in the shadows. None of them appeared in family photographs. Racism is a very household conflict in Cuban society.

In the last thirty years, Cuba's homegrown anti-racist critique has been accused of reproducing foreign, read here, the US or Brazil, anti-racist perspectives locally. Deeply critical anti-racist activists are considered radicals, political dissidents or ungrateful to the revolution. The reduction of Cuba's racist conflict to a dermic analysis concerned with deviating our attention from the emergence of racism in the only socialist country in the Caribbean. An issue that, on previous occasions, I have referred to as a recent sequence of excluding and humiliating actions normalized in our everyday and even assimilated by Cuban black people Cuba's *neo-racism*. I could only describe it as Cuba's *neo-racism*.

Curiously, unlike our sagacity to spot racist events anywhere in the world, it would be rather difficult to make out present-day racism in Cuba. This is precisely how our nation hides its abhorrence from discussing it *here*. It tends to compare what happens in Cuba with what happens in those other places, say Brazil or the US, where blacks are regularly incarcerated and murdered. Racism also exists in Spain, the Dominican Republic and Germany. While racist experiences may differ in each country, they are equally painful. This is why, in other countries, racism is denounced and discussed, and anti-racist laws are drawn, even with various levels of resistance. These are valuable practices and tools of the anti-racist struggle. They demonstrate acknowledgement of the existence of racism. This is the type of space for discussion, consensus and socialization of answers and solutions to racism in Cuba that we are missing.

Our debate about racism is still sequestered in meetings, officialist declarations and committees that prevent the socialization of the topic. Racism in Cuba is not the only black hole intermittently, superficially, and opportunistically discussed a couple of times a year in the media. Our lack of policies to deal with the issue of race expresses Cuba's political tardiness, incoherence and insensitivity in dealing with a problem that has yet to reach judiciary consistency in any of our courts and is not recognized as a cultural or institutional practice. Discussing racism in Cuba was prohibited for so long that it is still considered a sensitive matter.

The racist incident that took place recently in Holguin, eastern Cuba, was criticized without contextualizing that city as an area of Cuba historically populated by descendants of Spanish

migrants. Cuba's racist past included illegally segregated public parks across most Cuban provinces. If you were to break the rules, you could be shot at; we should remember the 1924 racist incident in Santa Clara's Parque Vidal. Or you could be murdered. We should not forget what happened in 1935<sup>1</sup> to a young man named Justo Proveyer in Trinidad's Parque Cespedes. We should also not forget how similar events happened in Cienfuegos and Camaguey, where in 1929, an announcement was made about the creation of a sect called the Invisible Imperial Palace of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>2</sup>

In Holguin, during this 2022 Halloween, the young men who went around shouting, 'Where are the negros?' had received no education about the thousands of black Cubans who were massacred in one of the neighbouring provinces in 1912; most of them were members of the Partido Independientes de Color (PIC, Independent Party of Color). I will not ask them what they were taught about the black soldiers who were massacred in Fort Pillow following the orders of a confederate general named Nathan Bedford Forrest, who was also a slave trader. Those young men ignore that in 1886 that same general founded the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee, in 1886. This terrorist organization would later spread across the US South as a secret brotherhood of white men who hated blacks, illegally appropriated their possessions, raped black women and terrorized the black community with their two favourite rituals: hanging black people and burning their houses, schools and churches. They also murdered a few white politicians who supported blacks.

In the twentieth century, starting from 1915, the Ku Klux Klan also attacked the Jewish and Catholic communities. In the twenty-first century, the Klan has recuperated the Confederate flag, recruited hundreds of new members, and in their online platform, presents itself as a movement with a national base integrated by white Christian men, women and children who support the return to a government of white Christians. Campaigns against Elian's return to Cuba, the closing of US borders, and the elimination of laws against possessing weapons have also been held by the same site. The KKK is a force alive in the US linked to racism, xenophobia and the white supremacist practices exacerbated by Donald Trump also against those Cubans who think themselves white only to realize they do not qualify as WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) and assimilate the Latino or Hispanic identity once they arrive in the US.

In broad terms, that would be the historical context that the young men in Holguin ignore. I consider them guilty and acknowledge that the ignorance and lack of education driving their actions might mitigate their culpability because what is actually at work is how they were educated. They are the *strange fruits* of Cuba's twenty-first-century neoliberal harvest. Their Halloween trick-or-treat outings turned into the boomerang of the ambitions of an island-based, economically powerful middle class that is both culturally mistaken and inclined to a pedestrian variant of the American dream. Beyond the insertion of Halloween amongst our few present-day public celebrations, there is an economic, political and cultural model which, since the end of last century, accommodates its exclusive values and reproduces them over

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<sup>1</sup> Zurbano, Roberto: *Cruzando el parque ¿Hacia una política racial en Cuba?* In *Humania del Sur*. Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos, Africanos y Asiáticos de la Univ. de Los Andes, Venezuela, No. 31 (Jul-Dec 2021), pp. 137-170.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Night, Kezia Sabrina: *La revista Minerva. Una voz contra el Ku Klux Kan en Camaguey*. In Boletín de la Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de Camaguey. Page [www.ohcamaguey.com](http://www.ohcamaguey.com). Accessed on November 1, 2022.

the gaps left by the older vertical model of our nation. A model mostly closed to the critical socialization of social values inside and outside Cuba. Both the neoliberal and the older models coincide in their dependence on the American commercial framework that reaches Cuba despite the US embargo and its *remakes*. (A cultural and self-critical analysis of the embargo would still be pending).

The paternalism and close-doors attitude surrounding the discussion of racism in Cuba hides behind this absurd, infantile, and equally racist provocation. Along with the sugary idealism of some TV spots that romanticize the narrow, outdated and unfounded notion of the *color cubano* (a Cuban colour), that may have been valid in Nicolas Guillen's thought back in the 1930s when some of his ideas made sense and others did not. In particular, his celebration of racial mixing, Cuba's mulattohood, and the notion of *color cubano* itself, which has been idealized by some today as an anti-racist campaign.

Today, Cuban racism is rejuvenated through other actors and spaces that, while not explicitly, still apply and control it at will. A covert, sophisticated racism that gentrifies and impoverishes our cities, neighbourhoods and communities, imposing new norms, taxes and imaginaries easily manageable by our high bureaucrats, new impresarios and nightclub doorkeepers beyond their public or private status or the complexion of their skin.

The growing implosion of racist events across Cuba incorporates every sign of the current political crisis. On the one hand, while some of those signs do not imply the question of race, each makes visible the many variables affecting our black population and marks how our voices do not feature in public debates and our absence in key sectors of our society. On the other, Cuban anti-racist activism already exhausted, fragmented, and co-opted struggles to carry its voices beyond the topics of entrepreneurship, black aesthetics, academic niches, new projects and self-promotion actions; all of it full of black middle-class aspirations that lack racial awareness and other paramount values.

These are legitimate aspirations, but they lack the critical edge Cuban anti-racist activism carried in the 1990s with its open debates, denunciations, catharses, and the recognition of a social discomfort publicly discussed. In less than a decade, Cuban anti-racist activism became an anti-racist movement with several branches that created a peculiar political space. The Cuban state dismantled that type of activism through a political strategy that eroded our anti-racist discourse and made it surrender through promises, fear, and the uncertainties of those times. The silencing and abandonment of our critical discourse gave way to a racist language by the state that, in turn, reactivated the classist language at the core of many of its post-July-11-2022 political speeches and how it addressed not only black Cubans but also those who are poor, marginalized and protesting.

The initial impetus of Cuban anti-racist activism died; its major handicap was that it did not transform anti-racist practices into cultural practices. It did not transform anti-racism into the type of civic practice we need to explain some of our other social conflicts. It was challenging to take on a culture of responsibility and public monitoring achieved, despite it all, by the various branches of island-based feminism. Today, Cuban anti-racist activists are farther away from reaching a similar transformation than fifteen years ago when our actions rose a direct critique of the coloniality of Cuban domestic politics; the coloniality configuring Cuba's socialist

hegemony, which, as I have warned before, 'has three great accomplices; they are Cuban neo-conservatism, internal colonialism and neo-racism, none of them receives enough public questioning.'<sup>3</sup>

We should understand that racist and anti-racist practices become permanent experiences in our private and public lives. They are neither isolated nor exceptional events, as seen through the official culturist perspective. Instead, these events are profound, quotidian, structural and transcendental. Only racial prejudice, political cowardice, and ignorance could miss the subterfuges of the vile social machinery of racism beyond those who reject it and reproduce it.

Suppose the civic forces in our society cannot express their discomfort and aspirations by being part of the debate of ideas and propositions. In that case, they will find a path to defend and celebrate the nation we need, our spaces for social critique and political resistance. Our new anti-racism emerges, boldly negating its predecessor while also being nourished by its triumphs and lessons. Forecasts are alarming. The reply of the rumba musicians in my neighbourhood to 'Where are the negros?', the question shouted by the young men in Holguin, was full of street genius. They said: 'Well, it is not like we are invisible; you know where we are; we don't have passports.' Those rumba musicians do not know about *strange fruits* or limones baratos (cheap limes). The reality they live in has no masks. Their existence is precarious and overheated.

Cayo Hueso, Havana, November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022.

Roberto Zurbano. Cultural critic and anti-racist militant.

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<sup>3</sup> Zurbano, Roberto: *Racismo vs. Socialismo en Cuba: un conflicto fuera de lugar (apuntes sobre/contra el colonialismo interno)*. In *Revista Meridional* (Chile), April 2015. Published in Cuba in *Revista Cubana de Ciencias Sociales*. No. 54. Instituto de Filosofía de Cuba, 2021, p. 243.