

Agujero Negro

[Black Hole]

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Prejudice condemned him to a lifetime of unhappiness. Today, another prejudice provides his livelihood. We human beings are certainly colorful, or at least that's the way Rolando Garzón Puig, alias the *Black Hole*, and his border philosophy, see us.

When I asked about him, someone said I would not find him before midnight because during "normal" daylight hours he lived hidden away like a tarantula. Some said he'd be at the park at Línea and 11th, or near Línea and M, near the Hotel Nacional's waterfall, in El Vedado. I was told to tread cautiously, "because the guy is a pain." But rather than find the time I spent talking to the *Black Hole* "painful," it was useful, sometimes fun, sometimes bitter, but always enriching.

I found him to be a very dark black man with a yellow top, like *congrí* rice and squash, as he, himself, says. He seems little more than twenty-years old, although he's

way beyond thirty. He is stocky and tough, so much so he seems unnatural and uncomfortable in his feminine wrapping—a pair of tiny, tight red shorts; a lilac shirt; and, large, finely woven sandals as big as his feet. He is an unwitting colossus, because, as he says, "being black and queer is enough already for the police to be after me constantly, so seeming physically threatening because of my size just makes it worse."

He is always alone, perhaps a measure of self-preservation, since others like him hunt in packs. He has few or no friends at all, but he is not hostile towards anyone: he just keeps everyone at a distance. He is both a troublemaker and a peacemaker, depending on the situation. He's rough around the edges but not loud, which makes him stand out, because he seems to have gotten enough education and social training. He is foul-mouthed but not to the point of being too vulgar. His smooth and deliberate way of

speaking belies his thundering voice, just as his mannerisms do his muscles. He has an agile, caustic, and creative mind; he is both affable and untrusting—at least he was with me the whole time we were together. Whether he likes it or not, he gets stares (not just because of his size and bleached out hair) from the most coveted *pingueros* (male prostitutes) available for the enjoyment of foreign gays—mostly Europeans—who today fly to Havana in search of the new *El Dorado*, or Fountain of Desire (as it is called in slang) that these days is found at the little waterfall located at the corner of Malecón and 23rd.

His success as a tourist “attraction” is precisely what he had in mind when he admitted to now filling his belly thanks to racial prejudice: “Europeans prefer blacks for sex acts not because they see in us unique human qualities. That’s a fairytale for idiots. The only way for us to find the painful truth of this matter is if we ask ourselves certain questions we rarely face, perhaps because it is not in the best interest of many of us. How much have nature and tradition contributed to the myth of our exaggerated sexual passion and physical attributes? What is the contribution to this situation of malicious racists who see us as no more than brute force, almost like animals, which promotes the idea that we have greater potential in this arena than anybody else? How much poison is behind this alleged preference? Aren’t the colonialist overtones of this attitude apparent—and not only among Europeans? Hasn’t our country’s tourist industry put blacks on display, and sold us as an exotic product? Aren’t many of us guilty of liking and even being proud of this essentially racist criterion? These were not the first, or the last, or the only questions raised by *Agujero Negro* during our chat: his intention was to show how he was like a gaping hole in

what he considers the ozone layer of the conservatism and submission under which we live in contemporary Cuba.

Prejudice as dead weight

Before taking to the street for employment, he used to teach art at one of the city’s art institutes. Way before that, he was a sad child and solitary youth who felt confused and trapped by his father’s lack of understanding and mother’s suffering. The word ‘prejudice’ has always had many layers of meaning for *Agujero Negro*. No matter how much he defends himself against it, he says it always ends up defeating him. It has been with him since birth, like an anchor, a dead weight that drags him down towards the bottom: “Didn’t I experience the very first incidence of prejudice—the worst, because it scarred me for life—in my very own home?” Using his unusual way of making weighty statements couched in questions, he proceeds to tell me that his father—ashamed—rejected him as soon as his homosexual inclinations became apparent. Beyond all the discrimination his family experienced on account of being black and marginalized, it was more painful as his father accused him of making their situation worse because of his “problem.”

“A faggot in the house!” his father would exclaim. “How shameful! Could anything worse happen?” His brow still furrows upon retelling this story, his eyes shining like peonies when he once again rhetorically asks if there is anything more pathetic than a victim of discrimination becoming a discriminator of his own flesh and blood. He rushes, however, to explain that he bears his father no grudge. On the contrary, he admires his honesty and hard-working nature. One of *Agujero Negro*’s greatest frustrations is that

he was never able to get close enough to his father before he died to tell him how much he loved and respected him for all the good examples he set for him. Even if the Santería shells warn black Cubans to not ask about something whose answer is known, not one night goes by that he doesn't wonder what his father would say if he found out that it is he who feeds his family with the money he earns thanks to his life as a black queer. Whether we believe him or not, which does not really concern him (or at least that is what he throws in my face, looking directly into my eyes), he has never enjoyed the fact that he sells himself. Moreover, he says he hates his work as a *pinguero*. Even if we end up thinking this sounds like a chapter from a soap opera, he risks confessing to us that if he'd had the chance to practice his profession decently, he never would have considered the benefits of prostitution.

Towards the end of the nineties, when *Agujero Negro* was known by most as Rolando, or Roly by a choice few, he began to have clashes with his supervisors at the municipal art institute. How could anyone convince me," he asked over and over, "that it was a good idea to abhorrently reduce the limits of our popular culture to a shaking of behinds, the sweetness of our musical rhythms, and the ridiculous idea of commodifying our black spiritual practices, all of which draws foreigners—and not just them—, and not just because they understand it or feel it in their hearts, but because, in any event, it frightens them?"

They had survived times of extreme need with no other option but to awaken every morning hungry and hopeless. So it seems understandable, but not justifiable, that such circumstances caused many to do whatever they considered necessary to remedy their urgent situation.

Cuban culture is much more than that, of course. Yet, *Agujero Negro* believes that for decades it had been ignored—even as a possible remedy to the problem—for many decades. To the contrary, it was excluded, devalued, and repressed, as the Santería example shows: "When the water was up to their necks, the authorities' idea of financially expanding and exploiting options for tourists by taking advantage of blacks and their culture seems to have functioned as a lifesaver. Then one began and continues to see many nightclub acts that tout themselves as authentically presenting the nation's folklore. In reality, though, they are just like absurdly over-sweetened sweet potato pies wrapped up in cellophane paper. What one sees is fraudulent garbage—arts and crafts produced by craftsmen, and even folk painters and sculptors, and the misrepresented savvy of certain purported experts on our brand of syncretism. One can find legions of impromptu ethnologists, anthropologists, and folklorists under any rock, but they do have their *de rigueur* business cards and attire. Many are the oracles that announce nothing more than the kind of sweet talk that will pull the wool over the eyes of anyone willing to pay, and the formerly prohibited dance academies (that used to be displaced from public studios). In any event, the dances they teach cannot be learned by the European tourists who sign up for them, because in order to do so one must grow up with them; much less could they be taught at an academy since they require much more than just physical movement. These dances involve—in addition to and above all—soul."

These are calamities that *Agujero Negro* could understand but not applaud. The worse thing of all was that they expected him to be part of this sham by accepting and even

professionally validating a circus that was sold under the guise of an unprecedented revitalization of our cultural roots instead of as what it actually was—a business: “Perhaps it was I who was crazy, or it was just craziness to have spent centuries fighting for the respect of our culture and traditions, whole centuries resisting colonialism and other plagues from on high, to then actually be the ones adulterating and cheapening the best of our cultural treasures—in just a few years—to tear them up and sell them to foreigners?”

Since he was not the crazy one, and he saw everything quite clearly, he foresaw a need to change jobs. But the authorities made it easy for him by firing him overnight. He assures me it did not bother him much as he was getting accustomed to failure. Rolando Garzón was left free of blame, but with his pockets and guts turned inside out. He was now free to stop repressing his feminine nature, which had heretofore been criticized by his supervisors. He was now free to descend to the rank of *Agujero Negro*.

Green is the color of optimism

Jobless, with no opportunities or possibilities, and burdened with every kind of need, he decided to take his struggle to the street. Any job, no matter how furtive, was alright by him, so long as it allowed him to bring home the bacon at least once a day: from renting himself out as a overloaded beast of burden, painting houses, or unclogging toilets; to even bathing dogs and providing private care to sick people in hospitals.

He was sliding down a slippery slope. That is how he began his nightly visits to the area around Havana’s Central Train Station, the El Curita and La Fraternidad parks, as well as other places of marginal or

underground activity (for freaks, transvestites, illegal rackets, bad-ass gays, cheap whores, alcoholics, bums, rapists, masturbators, dope smokers...). There he saw another opportunity to come by more cash, pleasure, or both—at the same time. He was certain that the next step down would propel him down a one-way street: El Vedado, to hunt for foreign tourists either at the Fiat agency (in the Malecón district), or at the intersection of G and 23rd, or right in front of the Bim Bom or Infanta ice cream shops, or other always happenstance places, depending on the whereabouts of the police.

With just a few of his rhetorical questions, which are really hard and resolute affirmations, he attempts to summarize for me why he took months to decide to become a *pinguero*, and why he finally did it, something that totally contradicts his dislike of foreign tourists—not all of them—but those who visit Cuba in search of licentious behavior they cannot find in other markets—at least at such low prices: “Why was I reluctant to do it, except for the fact it meant crapping on my cultural convictions, on my principles and even on my personal preferences? Why would I not do it if it was the best way to help my mother and me survive, especially since my convictions and principles were already sloshing around with me in a cesspool of pain?” *Agujero Negro* insists upon proclaiming that he has no pleasant memories of any of the foreigners with whom he has had intimate relations up till now. He enjoys the cruelty of making fun of their perennial bad body odor—because they do not bathe sufficiently. He hates the way they look at and treat those who are new to his profession—always distant and from a position of superiority—no matter how attractive the foreigners find

them: “It is something akin to the way we look at sea lions when we visit the aquarium. Could it be that they believe they are materially superior to us because they are spiritually inferior?” That is his style: making statements that are questions.

There is only one time he refuses to answer one of my questions, preferring instead to resort to using the substance of a recent declaration made by one of his idols: Pablo Milanés. When I hinted to him that the winds of changes would come to Cuba sooner or later, and that in fact, one could detect a new official attitude towards homosexuals, *Agujero Negro* replied—paraphrasing Pablito—that there are still no faggots in the Communist Party—at least any admitted ones, and it is still who controls everything. He then went back to his old habit of responding to another of my observations with a question: “Is it, perhaps, that I live in the clouds, or is it that initiating a sex change operation in Cuba—where everything is in short supply and we are in crisis—is something akin to one of those nightclub spectacles they don’t actually present and then distort the truth and say

they do? Who can guarantee me that those politicians are not just enjoying smacking our behinds again?”

He is even less trusting of what to him is nonsensical—the concept of race-based discrimination. Given the social and economic situation of Cuba now, he believes it is less and less likely that there will come a time when the wrongs of history can be declared radically undone. He would be happy enough if “those who commodify blackness, as well as those who come from afar to buy it—at modest prices—would acknowledge once and for all times that blacks are something more than just sexually passionate, wonderful dancers, and exceptional musicians—that we are the founders of a new civilization and a syncretic national culture on the par with any other great culture of the world. And not only in its popular manifestations, which despite its richness, is not their only contribution.”

As for the rest, he maintains that his optimism used to be green but that the beasts of prejudice have consumed it; he may exaggerate. No one is a total pessimist when it comes to his or her own interests.