Masculinity, Race, and Sexual Roles in Cuba

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Masculinity is a social construction in Cuba. By the end of the eighteenth century, spokesmen for the dominant class had designed the prototype of the Cuban male: "a white male, born of a good family, dominant with women and slaves, and possessing no trace whatever of femininity." Yet, the social impact of the encounter of cultures and ethnic groups within Antillean slave society cannot obscure the multiracial character of Cuban society, particularly relative to how race is conceptualized and characterized by the innate violence of social relations between white slave masters and black slaves.

In this mixing and repositioning of cultures and ethnic groups that make up the contemporary Cuban male, blacks came out of it as the most disadvantaged of all. In the first place, there was the white Cuban social imaginary that stigmatized them, and served to forge a stereotype of how they were that was as effective as saying black Cubans were not the product of the traditions of their African ancestors, but rather of the racist idea that stuck them in the limited space created for them by nineteenth century scientificism, according to the slavocracy's objectives.

Were we to examine the pictorial iconography of the nineteenth century, the representation of black men was not only picturesque but also grotesque and sinister, brimming with lust. Their cultural practices were used as a synonym of barbarism. The series of images left by painter Víctor Patricio Landaluze: the drunken black, the black troublemaker, the black thief, etc.

The justifiable rejection of this stereotyped image led many black and mestizo community leaders in the Republic to privilege the "civilized" customs of white men to gain social recognition and to distance themselves from social stigma. As a result, the manner in which black men today project

themselves continues to reproduce, in many cases, an image that, in essence, is not their own. They are a patchwork of identity, like different labels, that lie buried in popular rhetoric and survive sociocultural and economic changes.

Generally, positive stereotypes claim black men are good dancers, good at sex, good sportsmen and good musicians. They are not identified as having paternal feelings, of being faithful to their partners, or of having job security. These ideas are not created or based upon any solid evidence; just simply by tradition.

One of the most negative aspects of the state of black masculinity has to do with social transgression: the more a black man successfully breaks the law, the more his masculinity is enhanced and reaffirmed. This is even reflected quite naturally in language. I had the opportunity to observe a great example of a young black man who publicly berated his partner because she had criticized his constant use of vulgar language.

The unnecessary presence in conversations of words that identify genitals indicates the degree to which masculinity is in crisis and, moreover, the impossibility of escaping traditional stereotypes about the violent relationships that persist in contemporary Cuban society but are actually more befitting of the slave-owning society of the nineteenth century. It is perplexing and surprising that a young man with schooling would affirm that it is normal for black men to say offensive words, that is: that vulgar language is his most authentic form of expression.

The concept of black masculinity in Cuba has served to further imprison him in the ghetto. It is expected that black men bring the strength and potency of their erect and well-developed genitals to all manner of diverse sexual relations. Furthermore, no one talks about orgasm as a climax of satisfaction. The idea is that black men should be able to bring their partners to orgasm with their mighty phallic instrument. This is like saying that black men are perceived more as objects of pleasure than partners with human qualities. Social alienation causes violent outbreaks, provoked by the imbalance in the way in which his identity is perceived in society. Coupled with an exaggerated sense of victimization, this serves only to keep black men in the racialized ghetto of his masculinity. Cuban black men will become fully realized when they rid themselves of the veneer social convention employed to construct a false identity for them. Only then will they be free.