

A Black Cuban Woman's 'Room of Her Own'

Yesenia Selier

Psychologist and essayist

Cuban. Resident of the United States

The insulting, vilified Afro-Cuban identity we painfully internalized through bloody accounts of the 1912 massacre, the Escalera massacre and the Aponte conspiracy, has emerged and in keeping with global tendencies in the African Diaspora. Still in its infancy, it seeks horizons and mirrors in which to gaze, for self-understanding. Today, those of us who think about this have a point of reference in the Civil Rights era, Malcolm X and his movement, and the tenet 'Black is Beautiful.'

Even if postmodernity has now situated 'otherness' at the center of things, and consequently imploded the essentializing nature of centuries of thought, blackness continues to be pondered by white intellectuals, and reinvented in any way imaginable by different powers and knowledge. This situation reflects not only colonial, or post-colonial realities, but also a real, numerical lack of black intellectuals thinking and writing from their position as blacks.

In her essay "A Room of Her Own" (1929) from almost a century ago, Virginia Woolf considered what conditions were necessary so that women could write fiction novels: "500 pounds" a year "and a room of their own" if they are to write without interruption.¹ In

thinking about what we might conclude from her ensuing analysis, while also taking into account the enormous geographic, historical and temporal distance between Woolf and us, I ask myself if we might find in this conclusion one of those dilemmas brought about by our discursive absence, because this iconic essay beautifully illustrates the issue faced by subaltern subjects when attempting to articulate their experiences, recreate, and create them. Woolf employs an explicit denunciation of the mental restrictions patriarchal society imposes on women who attempt to ratify their need to be their own subjects, something fundamental to all creators (and in this case, women, in particular).

Patriarchy is the *tabula rasa* against which feminists of all eras have struggled. It has represented a remote or fickle 'place' for black women. According to bell hooks, symbolic constructions of black women were created to emphasize their condition as sacrificable bodies.² If we think about Cecilia Valdés, María la O, or *bufo* theater's mulatto women—all of them archetypes, they are not only characterized as easy women, or women of loose or compromised virtue, but as sacrificable women, most importantly.³ In this respect, statistics

speak louder than words because they show that black women from any era are most likely to continue living in deep poverty, be less educated, and have more children. They will also most likely lack a male provider or any sort of economic or in-kind support. Thus, it has always been the case that black women will be more easily used sexually, and later abandoned, which makes them an easy target for verbal and physical abuse. This also results in a lessening consideration or valoration of her feminine attributes, her fragility and beauty, and will inspire even less sympathy for her troubles.

The alienation of blacks and blackness, and of black women in particular, is a constant element in the in and outs of history and everyday life. This shifting back and forth is imbued with fundamental or even, perhaps, foundational notions that exist conveniently far and outside ethical principles—our assessment of art and our aesthetic sensibilities. I cannot delve deeper into the issue of ethical principles for lack of ‘a room of my own.’ Even the Western canon’s idea of ‘high culture,’ a central concept in our artistic appreciation, is barely acknowledged. It is noteworthy that a contested term like ‘Afro-Cuban’ for classifying music whose origin was African was for over fifty years accepted by Cuban academics. Fernando Ortiz’s definition of it functions like a pressure valve, releasing the noisy and frightening tension that the omnipresent drum and *clave* sticks create. We have a separate room not just for what ebony bodies have obstinately recreated from what had heretofore existed only in Africa, but also native creations like the *rumba* and *conga*, and even the *son*, and all its subgenres. These would not exist except for the alternating nature of its creators in the ‘high and low’ world. This need to contain blackness is a curious tendency that can be found throughout our long history—in a jail, in the idea of ‘folklore,’ and in the agentive nature of rap. This

effort to contain blackness is an expression of an ever-present tension in Cubanness: what do we do with blacks?

Black women, who are seen in the popular imagination as eternal domestics, are victims of the incontestable realm of aesthetics. Value judgments like ‘kinky hair,’ ‘thick lips,’ ‘flat nose,’ ‘pretty black’ or ‘she could have been some kind of white woman’ are embedded in common Cuban thinking. They serve as just one of several backdrops before which our identities are constructed. Another is the concomitant relationship between femininity and beauty, and the centrality of appearance to that notion. Despite the fact that after the 1990s different cultural documents—like rap lyrics, poetry, and some examples of Cuban writing—have quite a bit to say about a black aesthetic, this concept continues being decisive and unresolved for most black women in the Diaspora. It is the one criterion that most affects our daily lives.

On the other side of the ‘puddle,’ yet another backdrop can be characterized by its aggressivity, and how it subtly dominates subjectivity and the globalized, postmodern State. In a neoliberal context, the place and value of personal choice, a concomitant rejection of collective action, and a greater focus on personal success are exaggerated. These are echoes of a neo-conservatism that is very much alive and has been revitalized by Viagra and new blood. It stands ready to annihilate each and every social victory that was won during the sixties, to corroborate feminism’s demise and the establishment of its imposter: post-feminism.

At the very least, this infamous post-feminism frames a series of attitudes espoused by women today. A straight-out rejection of feminism, as such, as a stigmatizing and androgynous doctrine did bring about new degrees of freedom for women—but not happiness. It

also promoted the notion that equity was legally guaranteed in contemporary societies. This, in turn, brought about a return to the geography of the body, and to normative pressures about it—a shrinking of clothing sizes, improvements through surgery, botox injections, and an extreme standardization of beauty and sexiness. Appearance for the postmodern woman is prescribed: she must be skinny, retouched, and shorn like a sheep in order to be both professionally successful and a selfless, sweet wife who is empowered only through consumption. She cannot, however, be a turn off for her husband. In a post-feminist world, *Sex in the City* is the greatest expression of an ideal feminine consciousness. It is a place where power is seen as equivalent to one's ability to consume. The *tabula rasa* or blank slate with which black women must operate is abysmally distant in nature from that of white women. In the United States, research shows that the average wealth of a black woman between 36-49 years of age is \$5 dollars, while a white woman's is \$45,000 (here wealth is understood as a difference between active values, or assets, and debt).⁴ So, in a country where the intellectual debate about the rights of blacks has ensued for over 200 years, and had a civil rights movement in the 1960s, we have a return to values that were surpassed fifty years ago.

So-called "bad" hair has ended for African-American women. In its place has been imposed 'dead' hair. Those fabulous 'extensions' and other mythic hair products for which our brutal neighbor to the north have been making black Cuban women desirous are made of almost 90% human hair. Fans of these extensions grew silently in number, supposedly among a choice few only, who 'did it on the sly' so no one would find out. Today, this practice is nearly normal and ubiquitous.

The stigmatization of each and every trait of black appearance has been one of moderni-

ty's obsessions. More than just a fashion, this horrible practice of hair implantation simply reinforces the notion of 'good' hair, and is the main theme in the documentary "Good Hair" (2009), by Chris Rock. Women of all ages, social classes and educational levels have no trouble whatsoever confessing to the camera that 'straight, relaxed hair helps white people feel calm [around us] and makes us look better.' Getting one's hair done is part of being a black woman, says actress Nia Long: "black men should embrace this, accept it."⁵ Accordingly, we should get our hair done because we don't have any. Black men should accept the absurd cost of black women actively participating in their own oppression. What we have come to is actually combing oppression and exploitation every morning. Every day, you either do it to yourself or impose it on someone else. How can you think clearly when you actively exploit yourself all the time? Sporting his own relaxed hairstyle of more than 20 years, the Reverend Al Sharpton tell us "we need a very basic movement to regain the notion that we shouldn't try to control something as close to us as the hair on our head."⁶

With the structural and historic difficulties African-American men have encountered when trying to integrate into mainstream society, and their tendency to marry into their own group, they function as Guinea pigs: "The practice of hair extensions constitutes a greater investment than the education of children," says Sharpton.⁷ Andre Harrell, a music industry executive, adds: "The price of supporting a woman is like the price of the real estate market in New York—it is sky high. The cost of visiting a beauty parlor can bankrupt you."⁸ As if this weren't enough, these hair extensions create limitations for personal and intimate relationships between couples, for example in their recreational options—no beaches or pools, a mere rain causes a panic,

and then there's the always traumatic 'do not touch' in bed. If you are with a girl who has extensions, focus on her breasts," recommends Harrell, both jokingly and painfully.⁹

The documentary includes voices that don't remain so silent when facing the pressures of late capitalism that impose themselves: and with their intimate, aesthetic and economic aberrations, end up breaking down and vanquishing women. Interior designer Sheila Bridges, a black woman suffering from alopecia, thoroughly embraces her condition and difference. Black women "use hair as if it were money [and] our self-esteem is tied up in it. [Aesthetic] standards today are entirely unrealistic and totally out of reach for black women."¹⁰

In 1997, Derrida shows this to be much more than just preconceived infamy. He points out that the notion humanity is above all is as a brotherhood. As such, it is a fundamentally phallogocentric concept. Furthermore, hegemony is invisibly white. White and black women all over the world have made incredible progress in matters like our education, economic and social participation, and have earned *de jure* and *de facto* rights. But, there is still a long way to go in terms of consistent equity and respect in our daily lives.

It is not my intention here to challenge my relaxed-hair sisters. Yet, it seems absolutely necessary to me in my effort to embrace black, female subjectivity in all its complexity and diversity, to deal critically with some of our realities. Our choices, even the most personal ones, have political consequences that go beyond any siren call. Black women and men, with or without straightened hair or lightened skin, are not changing the social consequences of technology's classification of racism. As one of Rock's interviewees asserts in "Good Hair," "letting my hair keep the texture with which it comes out of my head is seen as a revolutionary

act [and] one must have the conviction to keep it that way."¹¹

Black Cuban women at the margins of consumerism, from whatever their position in the complex fabric of our social and educational continuum, also battle daily battles in the mirror. Even when we are singing "La Bayamesa" [the Cuban national anthem], and honoring our national coat of arms, with its image of a Cuban woman, a dark-skinned beauty with long, straight hair under a Phrygian cap, we lack a room of our own. Ten percent of the people who live in Havana, with its teeming streets and neighborhoods, where one fifth of the island's population is concentrated, most of their inhabitants are black men and women who live in disgusting tenement houses and yards. I invite all of us to dare dream of a room of our own, and recreate it every day, as we stand looking in the mirror, and document by any means possible our experience. We must struggle, like salmon fighting to go upstream, against restrictive and oppressive criteria regarding our true beauty.

Notes:

1. Woolf, Virginia. "A Room of One's Own," in *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. London: Oxford Paperbacks, 1997.
2. hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. London: South End Press, 1992.
3. Martiatu, Inés Maria. *Bufo y nación: Interpelaciones desde el presente*. La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 2008.
4. Traywick, Catherine A. "How We're Doing: Women and Wealth" in *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (March 15, 2010).
5. Rock, Chris. *Good Hair* [HBO Documentary] (2009).
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.