

Parametration and Racism in Cuban Cultural Politics

Víctor Manuel Domínguez
Writer and journalist
Havana, Cuba

Echoes of parametration are still sounding in the halls of cultural institutions, like spectators. Those who were victims of that marginizing legislation, signed into law at the First Congress for Education and Culture (1971), are not without fear of new reprisals.

At events prior to and after the celebration of that congress (Havana, April 23-30, 1971) prejudices against artistic manifestations of African origin unleashed the most dramatic exclusion of its creators, especially if they were black. This time, the marginalization of black Cuban intellectuals who sought via Ediciones El Puente press and other cultural spaces new ways to engage, renewed voices, and diverse topics would be even more extreme, and it increased even more with time. They would be accused not only of aesthetic, sexual, racial, religious irreverence and supposed dissolute conduct, but also of wanting to integrate into the nation's cultural blend the African heritage their work reflected, work that gave them their *raison d'être*. The rejecting trend against those who differed from a cultural politics that privileged ideological loyalty, collective art, and socialist themes could be felt as early as the celebration of the preparatory seminars before the congress.

Playwright Tomás González was repressed “for expressing his opinion about the way in which the contribution and presence of elements of the African diaspora was presented in Cuban culture, and relegated; for denouncing the small percentage of blacks on television and in the National Ballet

of Cuba, or the stir that was generated against plays like “María Antonia,” by Eugenio Hernández Espinosa.”¹

Such was also the fate of black writers and artists like Walterio Carbonell, who demanded the participation of black Cuban intellectuals and the inclusion of African history in the curriculum for all levels of education in Cuba. They were accused of wanting to promote Black Power in Cuban culture.

Their work was censured or marginalized from the cultural sector: these included filmmaker Sara Gómez, ethnologist Alberto Pedro Díaz, historian Pedro Deschamps Chapeaux, essayist and anthropologist Rogelio Martínez Furé, playwright Gerardo Fullea León, sculptor Florencio Gelabert, and other black Cuban personalities in art and literature. The words of Belarmino Castilla (then Minister of Education) at the Congress's opening address revealed the discriminatory future to come: “Los maestros y profesores anhelan una literatura y un arte que se correspondan con los motivos de la moral socialista y rechazan todas las expresiones de reblandecimiento y corrupción” [Teachers and professors yearn for a literature and art that correspond to the essence of socialist morality, and reject any and all expression that might weaken or corrupt it].²

Along with the threats and restrictions pronounced by this governmental representative, the congress's final declaration “condenaba toda forma de intelectualismo, el homosexualismo y otras

aberraciones sociales” [condemned all forms of intellectualism, homosexuality and other social aberrations], and also excluded manifestations related to religions and practices of African origin, like Santería, Palo Monte and Abakuá.³ The worst was yet to come. At the event’s closing, Fidel Castro attacked Western intellectuals and pronounced the following cultural dictum: “El arte es un arma de la revolución” [Art is one of the Revolution’s weapons].⁴ A year later, during the summer of 1972, a process known as “parametration” was begun. This meant that artists and writers who were identified as conflictive, for different reasons, could not work as such, because their conduct did not fit within the parameters required by the revolution. Hundreds of people in the island’s theatrical movement (playwrights, directors, actors, choreographers) would be called before the National Council for Culture, and would end up being expelled from their centers of employment, or condemned to ostracism.

According to Inés María Martiatu, “los más afectados fueron las gentes de teatro. Y fue un grupo de gente de teatro el que hizo resistencia a este orden de cosas” [the most affected by this were theater people. And it was a group of theater people who resisted this order of things]. Once this period had passed, or at least after 40 years, the unburied cadavers of parametration and the yet unhealed wounds of the survivors dare to ask if the history of theater will remain in the past, behind the times? Can it be that the hundreds of black Cuban artists and writers who fell victim to marginalizing events like the dissolution of Ediciones El Puente press and the so-called Five-Year Grey period that generated parametration are supposed to ignore this racist period, which so severely impoverished our national culture? Some of the victims feel that the period should be forgotten; other say they can forget, but not forgive. Those who did not live through it, are afraid to learn about it.

The recent publication of works such as *Las polémicas artísticas de los años 60* [The Artistic Problems of the Sixties], by Graziella Pogolotti; *Los juegos de la escritura o la (re) escritura de la historia* [Writing Games or (Re) Writing History], by Alberto Abreu Arcia, and *Re-pasar El Puente*

[Re-Crossing The Bridge], an theater anthology edited and prologued by Inés María Martiatu, may well reflect the period and topic in all their crudeness, but it does not get the readership it deserves. Debating parametration today is not a sterile exercise in resentfulness, but rather a historically justifying act for those hundreds of artists and writers who suffered parametration.

To speak about a past political culture that legitimated the collapse or exclusion of artistic-literary projects headed by black Cubans today is to not have to be silent tomorrow. An institutionalized parametration ready to act, while disguised as timid openness, doubtful sentiments, and hidden censure at debates about race, may change its methods, but not its essence: instead of rejecting a black Cuban for not meeting culture’s parametric requirements, it will declare him or her NOT IDEAL, thus accomplishing the same mission.

No one should forget that a recent painting on display at an art gallery in Matanzas province was taken down for expressing the following on its canvas, four decades after the First Congress for Education and Culture: “Blancos sí, negro también” [Whites yes, blacks, too].

Is there or isn’t there still racism? Can one doubt that parametration is still in effect? The methods may be different, but the objective is the same: to discriminate against black Cubans in the nation’s cultural project.

Notes:

- 1- Martiatu, Inés María y Tomás González. “El autor como protagonista de su tiempo,” in *Tablas* 3-4 (2008): 140.
- 2- Arcia Abreu, Alberto. *Los juegos de la escritura, o la (re) escritura de la historia*. La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 2007: 139.
- 3- Dolz Fornés-Bonavia, Leopoldo. *Cuba cronología: cinco siglos de historia, política y cultura*. Madrid: Verbum, 2003: 247.
- 4- *Ibid.*