

To be a Black Woman or Man and Not Die Trying

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The real and very difficult challenge for any black Cuban woman or man at the present time is to rid her or himself of stereotypes that have been imposed due to over 400 years of racial iniquity. As a result of institutionalized policies—many of them erroneous—the striking qualifier “revolutionary being” was added to the image of black Cubans, of necessity and obligatorily. This added element served only to complicate the life and point of view of blacks as regarded true equality because it made us unequivocally endure a weight we never ever asked to bear.

In short, what this meant for blacks was to see their future intimately linked to that of the Revolution. As a result, and as part of the revolutionary process, we remained trapped in a completely dependent relationship, with no way out, and at the service of political contingencies. Since then, transcending the limits of what was deemed “politically correct” has meant that black Cubans have become worse than pariahs in their own country. Even if those in power ceded us a place in public spaces, as they would say they have, our right to decide for ourselves our position as civil subjects regarding the political system imposed by that leadership—heterosexual, white men, most of them single-minded, and imbued with a paternalistic view of society—were invalidated.

After forty years, and as a result of the greatest socioeconomic and spiritual crisis ever, it has become undeniably necessary to introduce changes and open spaces in which a reevaluation of the image and presence of blacks finally went beyond just an enumeration of what little had been gained by black women and men in Cuba.

The revolutionary process’s objective was to erase the previous society. Upon winning the battle, it proceeded to erase this society’s legacy from our memory, too. This caused black Cubans to lose a large part of their memory as a group, much of which was safeguarded in civic, fraternal, cultural and recreational associations and societies since the last twenty years of the nineteenth century. Today, we are without our own, historical support system as a racial group. Our memory has been reduced to the independence struggles led by heterosexual, white males whose view of society was equally patriarchal, deriving, as it did, from Spanish domination.

Black women and men were incorporated into the revolutionary process and paid for the possibility of occupying a place in the newly forming society with their right to social visibility, as individuals with a broader, richer identity. Once again, as always, they were relegated to assuming their most authentic condition and self-view according to their own identities within the Cuban nation, a real vicissitude.

For black and *mestizo* women, the road to redefining their gender and racial identities is more difficult, when considering traditional social convention. Being black or *mestiza* and female in Cuba means bearing a much more obvious burden than white women. Black and *mestiza* women have to struggle against centuries of being viewed in a disparaging manner, because their physical attributes are seen as tied to sensuality and sexuality, domestic traditions and familiar roles. In *Mujeres en crisis* [Women in Crisis] (2011), Helen Hernández Hormilla affirms: “La cultura patriarcal mantuvo sus bases en el interior de la sociedad, aquel referido a la vida cotidiana, las relaciones interpersonales y la economía de símbolos, pues si seguimos a Bourdieu, las estructuras del género van más allá de lo público para instalarse en la subjetividad y en el sistema semántico” [Patriarchal culture kept up its influence in society’s interior, daily life, interpersonal relations and the economy of symbols. According to Bourdieu, gender structures go beyond the public and become part of subjectivity and the semantic system] (84). Further on, she states: “Las inequidades que se pretendía superar hicieron evidente su permanencia en el ámbito familiar, la pareja, los prejuicios homofóbicos y los grados de empoderamiento” [The inequities that were trying to be overcome made their permanence in the family sphere, the couple, homophobic prejudices, and degrees of empowerment, quite evident].

Add to this situation the disdain for the historical memory of black women by white, male heterosexual power, and the result is an obstacle for them in their effort to be “re-cognized” (acknowledged) in their gender difference, and to have membership in a group characterized by difference, while all the while those in power proclaim a supposed, national unity that is in fact disdained on behalf of perpetuating domination.

Worse yet is the damage caused by still reigning homophobic prejudices and *machismo*,

which forces black and *mestiza* women into a classification even more negative than that of white women. They are seen exclusively as an object of desire at the service of the male sex, and are absolutely denied any other, possible, sexual orientation. Black and *mestizo* men suffer a similar fate, irrevocably linked to virile potency and physical exercise, with no options in their sexual orientation. Homosexuality is much less accepted in black or *mestizo* men than in white ones.

Although the number of interracial marriages has increased among Cubans, the image of black men continues to be complicated by the *machismo* and patriarchal attitude that still dominates the prejudices that hide in the darkest recesses of Cuban homes. Worse yet, the current, prolonged socioeconomic crisis has made primarily blacks and *mestizos* the group most affected by it, the largest prison population, a minority at universities, as well as a minority when it comes to the best remunerated jobs and positions of leadership.

This situation is responsible for putting different strategies for resolving the problem in the hands of certain institutionalized research and study groups, people in other, independent, cultural and social resistance groups, and even some prestigious, individual voices. Yet, they are more easily found outside Cuba, because in their own country they are still invisibilized.

To keep from dying in our attempts, black Cubans must re-identify ourselves as subjects conscious of an inherited imaginary, and reposition ourselves within the historical narrative of our nationality. This will make it possible for us to reconstruct our support network, so we can re-link ourselves with our immediate ancestors, because previously, our identity has been systematically kept a secret from us. Only this strategy will make it possible to not die in our attempt to be active participants in our nation’s reconstruction.