

The Mulatto Woman: She Looks White... but is She?

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Miscegenation is still one of the most enduring and debated cultural myths in the countries of Ibero-America—and Cuba is no exception. Despite the manipulated official myth that says that we are all equal or the same, the social disadvantages faced by blacks and the ambivalent definition of the racial identity of *meztizos* in Cuba makes them objects of discrimination, due to their skin color.

While it is not my intention to conduct an anthropological study here, which in Cuba

would be grounded in transculturation theory, as it was described by Don Fernando Ortiz, I will delve into some aspects of the persistence of the “Cecilia syndrome,” a term coined by Inés María Martiatu to define this tragic desire of Cuban mulatto women to whiten themselves and ascend the social scale.¹

Many of the racial prejudices concerning mulatto women became relevant after the appearance of Cecilia Valdés, the main protagonist of the homologous novel by Cirilo Villaverde. Its action takes place during the time of slavery and

Spanish colonial rule in Cuba, during the 19th century, and was used, much later on, as a model upon which to construct a paradigm of Cuban national culture.

Thus, it would not be just another futile tautological exercise to say that the myth of whether mulatto women are black or white in our popular imagination was born with *Cecilia Valdés*. It debuts as a stereotype in farcical *bufo* plays and survived in Havana tenement yards and everywhere during Cuba's republican period (1902-1958).

In today's Cuba, some mulatto women strut their apparent racial duality around the Historical Center in Old Havana, travel on the arm of a Spaniard in an Iberia jetliner, or are associated with unbridled or at least free sexuality in popular songs, video clips and even a Cuban brand of rum—all because of the hybrid legacy of their image. The tragedy that affected the nineteenth-century, republican mulatto woman: “being the ill-fated woman who had no place in society because of her hybridity,”² is still taking place today, due to her “biracial” condition. Yet they are fully accepted, and even have some advantages, due to the power of the sexual attraction of their bodies, and the aesthetic tastes of certain European visitors and average Cuban men in our own country.

The term ‘biracial,’ coined by Sandra del Valle describes “a dual state according to racial identity that produces the possibility of being acknowledged as belonging to both the black and white race, which situates one outside the established racial order.” This situates the mulatto woman in an intermediate and, thus, undefined state in society's ethnic spectrum.³

The Cecilia Syndrome

Both derogatory expressions and praises about mulatto women are always tinged with

discrimination—because of their obvious racial duality. Even if her figure, skin tone and straightened hair conform to stereotypical models of beauty, or she has a beautiful figure, but also has black skin and straight hair, she is still the victim of prejudice, due to her false identity.

In their efforts to be taken for white women, or appear to be white, the problem of mulatto women is that they are trapped in the “Cecilia syndrome.” They spare no effort to achieve a goal that once reached causes them to be discriminated against by those who do not consider them equal—because of the social ascendancy their racial masquerade affords them.

In a scene from *Parece blanca* [She Seems White], a play by Abelardo Estorino about the myth of Cecilia Valdés (based liberally on the novel by Villaverde), the playwright exposes how the protagonist becomes aware of her raciality and the privilege of whiteness.

As Sandra del Valle correctly points out, “it is precisely the black grandmother who initiates the girl in this **culture of color** and racial discrimination. In this particular passage in the text, ‘the grandmother's racist rhetoric and self-flagellating rhetoric, and the idea of nearly being white, become obvious.’”⁴

CECILIA: I was playing hide-and-go-seek with Nene.

CHEPILLA: Look at you! A raggedy and nearly barefooted darky!

(...)

CHEPILLA: You don't need to be around those blacks.

NEMESIA: This old lady hates blacks as though she'd been born in Galicia.

CHEPILLA: You look white. Look at that face. See the skin? White. And take a good like at the nose; it is fine, like that of a young lady. And that hair reveals you have white blood.

CECILIA: Good skin and hair don't do me any good.

CHEPILLA: When you are a woman, and it's time for you to look for a husband, a white gentleman will appear and ask you to marry him, and he will take you to a home with floors that shine like mirrors, and you'll have a carriage...

CECILIA: A carriage!

CHEPILLA: ...and dresses...

CECILIA: From Paris!

CHEPILLA: ...And I'll never say that I'm your grandmother, and will look at you only from afar, always from afar.

(...)

CECILIA: I always want to live with you.

CHEPILLA: Oh, if you only knew what it means to be white in this land...

These prejudices concerning racial identity itself not only contribute to the woman losing self-esteem, but also to destroying the rich aesthetic and cultural legacy inherited from her African ancestors. They debase or humiliate the bearer of a mask that can never erase the spiritual traces engraved just below the color of one's skin.

One of the outcomes that results from Cecilia's Valdés' taking on an ambiguous racial identity, after internalizing her grandmother's teachings, and ridding herself of the black part of her in order to achieve social ascendancy, can be seen at "the colored people's dance," as it is described in Villaverde's novel of manners.

As Cecilia accepts compliments and dances only from mulatto men who are "famous and refined with ladies," such as famous violinist José María Brindis de Sala or poet Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido), real, historical figures situated in the text by Villaverde, the author sets forth the disdain the protagonist felt towards someone she considered inferior to her, from her position of 'whiteness': "Any average observer

could see that despite Cecilia's affable manner with anyone who spoke to her, she established noticeable differences between black and mulattoes."⁵

Cecilia's discriminatory act towards members of her own race and social class climaxed when she refused to dance with a man because of the black color of his skin. The authors strips Cecilia of the mask of her pretend color in a dialogue that denotes the prejudices and humiliations both offered and received by the mulatto woman in her desire to whiten herself: "When young Cecilia responds to the remonstrances of the man who answered her: 'Well, I don't know you, nor...', 'Nor does it worry you, young lady. I understand. Yet, I should say to you, young lady, that you disdain me because you think you are white, because your hide is white. Young lady, it is not. You may fool others, but not me.'"⁶ According to the literary arguments set forth by Villaverde and revisited by Abelardo Estorino regarding Cecilia Valdés' racial identity, the mulatto woman seems white, but is she?

The mulatto woman: from the slave barracks to the Iberia jetliner

The fruitless, discriminatory debates to define whether or not mulatto women are white have generated countless humiliations and prejudice all throughout our country's centuries of miscegenation. A crucial place at the crossroads at which the term 'mulata' was debated, in order to define her by color, was Cuban *bufo* theater. The presence in these plays of the Galician, mulatto woman and black man was essentially discrimination masked as racial joking. Far from being an exercise in integration or Cubanness, these roles displayed the assumed vulgarity and inferior nature of blacks and *mestizos* when compared to whites.

According to Inés María Martiatu, "critiques of *bufo* theater vary. Some emphasize

their comicity, applauding it as a supposedly funny and popular form of manners theater, forgetting just how much that theater denigrates and excludes, and its characteristic levity, a theater that is nothing more than an anecdotal, superficial view of reality.⁷ Yet, “one of the most illustrative examples of the injurious, racist rhetoric of *bufo* theater is the fact that the best inventions attributed to Galicians are the wine jar, canvas sandals and mulatto women. One could hardly find a more vulgar and offensive statement.”⁸

If in addition to this we consider that the term ‘mulatto’ is also pejorative, because it compares people to mules—the offspring of a mare and donkey—we find a discriminatory expression that both humiliates mulatto women and calls them animals, which exceeds just joking and makes racial dignity unobtainable.

An anecdote from the real life of playwright Eugenio Hernández Espinosa reveals how upon leaving the theater after staging a *bufo* play containing a Galician, mulatto woman and black man, he, himself, became the victim of discrimination at the hands of some neighborhood whites who had been at the same theater: “As we exited the theater, they began to make fun of blacks, enjoy themselves at our expense, and call us by the names of the characters in the play.”⁹

This discriminatory act, even today, can be seen in diverse comedic spaces, places in which not only blacks are victims of the hidden and supposedly funny racism inherent to Cuban humor. Mulatto women are, too. One can also see this on Café TV, the Focsa building, and at the America and Astral theaters.

Mulatto women—that stereotype of Cuban beauty—are applauded or criticized for having ‘landed’ a ‘Pepe’ (a Spanish citizen) in order to be able to leave the country or ‘advance the race’ and make herself white—no matter how. Even though not all mulatto women

of that time (or even now) were that way, and did not have the same aspirations, those who are caught up in the “Cecilia syndrome” often prompt discriminatory acts.

It seems that the only real out for the many Cecilia Valdéses is to get a white man, at any price, and if he is a foreigner, better yet. It is not uncommon to hear expressions like: “Black makes us goes back; we have to advance the race,” “God made blacks to complete a group/ and when He saw how dumb they were/he gave them to the Devil,” “White as coconut dough, even if it gives me a bellyache,” or “Whites are clarity; blacks, shadows.”

According to Rómulo Lachateñere: “Even in their own reactions, mulattoes don’t consider themselves black—nevertheless—they know they’re not white. The result? A basic instinct to ‘reject their own race’ . . . and make the changes necessary to be able to get closer or farther from blacks, depending on whether the reactions in their environment are positive or negative.”¹⁰

Today’s backwardness regarding this issue, deriving from the “synthesis of contradictions inherent in the pyramid of subordinations with which Enrique José Varona identified Cuban colonial society,” can sometimes be seen in Cuba’s racism today, in a verse that in its popular version goes like this:¹¹

*Being white is a profession,
mulatto, damnation for the soul,
black is a bag full o’ coal,
that is sold at any concession.*

For many critics of the current behavior of mulatto women, Cuban *bufo* theater has traveled in H.G. Wells’ time machine to our country’s streets today. According to these died-in-the-wool cultivators of national racism, the trio Galician-mulatto women-black man is an everyday thing in Cuba’s contemporary society. In daily practice, the stage and roles are

different, but they still work to garner favor with people of their own color—the Galician (or any white foreigner), through his ‘superior’ race; the mulatto woman, through her sexuality; and the black man, in their shadow, in order to survive.

Furthermore, the level of the actors may have changed, but the relationship is the same. The Galician now no longer uses canvas sandals, and is the one who has the big bucks; the mulata is the prostitute; and the black man, the pimp who hires her out, or sells her, while he is all the while swindling the “Pepe” with fakely branded cigars and adulterated bottles of rum. Nothing and everything has changed. Sitting along the Malecón, I heard one person say to another: “Mulatto women have jumped from the slave barracks to the Iberia jetliner.”

If Cirilo Villaverde’s Cecilia “embodies a sexual politics that naturalizes women’s bodies as a kind of upward social mobility towards white status,” mulatto women who do this today, do it in their search for economic independence and social freedom—something guaranteed to everyone in the country’s Constitution. The only way they can achieve them is by having a foreign passport in their possession.¹²

The myth of the sexuality of mulatto women, often exacerbated by many who suffer from “Cecilia syndrome,” brings together on the same discriminatory and crude level those who dream of whitening themselves and ascending socially, and those who instead of physically or spiritually prostituting themselves are proud of their color. They do not disdain anyone—blacks or anyone—for having darker skin. Nor do they covet people with white skin because they are lighter.

As Inés María Martiatu correctly points out about the sexuality of mulatto women, “the acceptance and persistence of these concepts, and of these distorting and camouflaging operations, reveals how the falseness of these

models do not keep them from being accepted and persevering in people’s popular imaginary even today.”¹³

The act of being or not being white, and dying in the attempt “represents the invalidity of the category of race, how it is in a state of crisis, more than just a falsification or fraud.”¹⁴ The road to racial identity is definite, no matter how much skin color is changed, masked, manipulated or faked by those who reject their color.

The issue is not to be white, black or *mes-tizo*. Dignity resides in being consistent with the human condition’s values, beyond any racial identity acquired as a result of skin color. To appear to be something is a lie; *being* it is the only truth.

Notes:

1- Martiatu, Inés María. *Bufo y Nación*. (Letras Cubanas: La Habana, 2008): 94.

2- *Ibidem*, 93.

3- Del Valle, Sandra *La Gaceta de Cuba* (mayo-junio de 2009): 52.

4- *Ibidem*.

5- Villaverde, Cirilo *Cecilia Valdés o La loma del Ángel*. (La Habana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1972): 72.

6- *Ibidem*, 73.

7- Martiatu, Inés María. *Op.cit*, 12.

8- *Ibidem*, 92.

9- Martiatu, Inés María. “Eugenio Hernández, un dramaturgo entre la polémica y altos riesgos” in *La Gaceta de Cuba* (enero-febrero de 2005): 6-10.

10- Romay, Zuleica. “Mito, sociedad y racialidad en Cuba” in *La Gaceta de Cuba* (mayo-junio de 2012): 14.

11- *Ibidem*, 15.

12- Martiatu, Inés María. *Op.cit*, 94.

13- *Ibidem*.

14- Del Valle, Sandra. *loc. cit*.