

Afro-Cuban Women in Search of Their Own Imaginary

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Cuba's black, female population lacks a valid imaginary. Their only possible options for becoming empowered are to be athletes who win some medal or another in an international sports competition, or singers who shape their curves with silicone and use false eyelashes.

Aside from prostitution, or the resale of cheap goods and merchandise received from family members in Mexico, Miami or Ecuador, only three of the numerous sources for stocking stores, the only other option Afro-Cuban women have is to sit on a porch behind a wire hung full of jeans, mini-shorts, excessively colorful T-shirts, shiny beads, third-rate mens' and womens' shoes, cheap perfume knock-offs, and other similar merchandise, and sell them.

There is a lot of talk lately about citizen empowerment and economically disadvantaged groups in Cuba. Yet, what we really need is for black men to be aware of the fact that black and *mestizo* women contribute a great deal to their brothers. This is especially true at the present time, when even General President Raul Castro acknowledges that salaries are too low, and admitted that if the labor force does not produce more, a salary increase would be unimaginable.

So, how to solve the problem of economically supporting a family? An extremely high number of households have only one income coming in, after the government put into practice its plan to streamline the workforce, which was approved by the last Communist Party Congress as a way to bring the economy up to date. Can black and *mestizo* women really feel validated if they don't even have a truly edifying job with which to guarantee their survival in the middle of an economic crisis that has been ongoing since the late 1980s?

The situation is even more difficult in homes where divorced or single mothers are the only breadwinners, and they have to make it on their own, or with scant help, persistently unmet needs, and real, material decapitalization, which is worse yet if one considers their terrible housing situation. Estimates are that 80% of this housing is barely habitable or substandard. Furthermore, among the poorest of them, particularly those in marginalized neighborhoods, they are forced to deal with intrafamily, domestic and even street violence. Neither are they safe from sexual abuse, or even rapes and physical assaults during robberies.

An overwhelming majority of black and *mestizo* women have only Mariana Grajales,



Black Cuban woman in shelter. Cambute

the mother of the Maceo brothers, and her daughter-in-law, María Cabrales, as role models to look to, because official propaganda celebrates the sacrificial actions of mothers and wives who gave their loved ones up onto the nation's altar, and their commitment to political causes. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this from a patriot and nationalistic point of view, except that these are nineteenth-century examples belonging to a past worthy of being remembered. They contribute no solutions whatsoever to the everyday problems faced by Afro-Cuban women in the twenty-first century.

Why are women like Úrsula Coimbra de Valverde, Catalina Pozo Gato, Salie Derosme and other journalists who wrote and defended the visibility of black and mestiza women and their upward, social mobility, and advocated for Afro-Cuban women to be taken into account in a reexamination and reevaluation of the national narrative ignored?

Tons of paper is used to print history books devoted entirely to an official policy of promoting people who almost always have white skin. These publications contribute no valid examples with which to deal with the situation confronting Afro-Cubans as a population group nearly entirely in dire economic straits. What possible justification could the governmental authorities have for continuing to ignore the efforts of thousands of Afro-Cuban men and women who managed to improve their social and economic situation, for not promoting them as positive role models? Why does it take so long to promote Afro-

Cuban women in all sorts of professions, particularly in the fields of health care, education and the technical sciences? There are many of them, after all: women represent 65% of Cuba's technical and professional workforce, according to official statistics.

Put all together, and all this serves to make Afro-Cuban women feel disdained, undervalued and far from being able to find solutions, except for living in their currently marginalized condition as a way to escape personal crises and all of society.

If they are truly interested in achieving something positive, the campaigns promoting the visibility of Afro-Cubans that have been launched recently by a number of entities and organization linked to the Cuban government, should begin to allow Afro-Cuban women to recover a female imaginary that can help reinforce their very necessary visibility, as a way to move them towards a process of change focused necessarily on the future democratization of Cuba.