

To Be a Black Woman, a Lesbian, and an Afro-Feminist in Cuba Today

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Estar juntas las mujeres no era suficiente, éramos distintas

Estar juntas las mujeres gay no era suficiente, éramos distintas

Estar juntas las mujeres negras no era suficiente, éramos distintas

Estar juntas las mujeres lesbianas y negras no era suficiente, éramos distintas

Cada una de nosotras teníamos sus propias necesidades y sus objetivos y alianzas muy diversas—Audre Lorde (cited by D’Atri, 2002, p. 1)¹

Introduction

Before talking about Afro-feminism in Cuba as a concept, there has to be an accounting of the history of struggle by women and the diverse processes through which global feminism underwent. The concept of feminism, whose significance does not only pertain to contemporary societies, has existed throughout centuries in different forms, although since industrialization it moved to a global scale. Cuba was not somehow disconnected from this process. Since the Middle Ages, philosophy and history has named different figures that, even if one did not call them such, were taking steps toward feminism.

They were questioning male power like the women—e.g., Pitagóricas, Theano, Phintys,

¹ [From the editor: The original reads (italics included) *Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different.* (Lorde, 1984, p. 226) I left the Spanish translation of this for a very specific reason, of all the translations of the various author’s work, this is the only one that is not exactly a direct translation. For example, instead of using a word like *tuerca* (a word for dyke—which Lorde originally uses in her essay) the author uses the word “lesbian.” I would prefer to leave it this way to give the reader, especially those who read Spanish, a chance to think about the politics surrounding word choice in translation, if there are any.]

Perictione, Aspasia, Safo, Las Hetairas, Glycera, Herpiles, and Hiparquia—who, in their struggles, were looking to transform their lives through resistance. It was an approach that sought to influence the men of that time, looking to change culture, art, politics, and customs. The struggle against misogyny (women’s oppression) formed a part of this constant battle that even today is fought. At the end of the Middle Ages, they had won some pyrrhic victories. Leading movements against and the discussions to rebut these misogynist thoughts were educated men and women, such as “Les précieuses ridicules” who publicly presented these challenges within the public space that they were given.²

We can properly begin to talk about feminism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which were connected to the French Revolution and also to modernity and the Enlightenment, in the sense that it has its references in rational ideas that were influenced by notions of equality between the sexes; of the incorporation of women into culture and by their liberation, which would imply their conquering of public spaces. At the end of the eighteenth century, feminist theory was widespread. The women that fought and were the protagonists in the French Revolution published texts that had important repercussions for their lives and the time period. One cannot forget the price that they paid to defend the rights of women. Olimpie de Gouges, for example, was killed by the guillotine, and Mary Wallstonecraft was assaulted in her intent to be a single mother. Not to mention the many others who went on hunger strikes, faced the closing of their clubs, and other barbarities.

None of this served to deter them, and the suffrage movement was born. Between the voices of those at Seneca Falls, of the working class, of Betty Fredan with her focus, movements extended from the United States to England. To Cuba this influence arrived through Ana Betancourt and then emerged with Emilia Casanova, Juana Borrego, Gertrudis

² A 17th-century French women’s comedic group.

Gómez de Avellaneda, Camila Henríquez Ureña, Aurelia Castillo, Mari Blanca Alomá, and others who were invisible and not named, like the Afro-Cuban María Damasa Jova, as were other Black and mestiza women that began the defense of their rights in the magazine *Minerva* (Rubiera, Martiatu, 2011). A lot of the experiences of the following generations of women in Cuba were the result of a process of struggle for equal rights for women within Cuba's social system, such as the specific actions of the Federation of Cuban Women.

In this process they identified diverse foci like the feminism of equality, a concept in which is highlighted the idea that the sexual division of labor reflected inequality between the sexes and the feminism of difference, which highlighted the importance of knowing one's body and the fight for women's total autonomy. This also valorized the search for a new focus in the sexual revolution, the need to separate the absolute power given to the penis, which perpetuated patriarchy. We looked for the women that were able to define what pleasure meant for us and how to demand our sexual rights. Also when we talk of gender as a category of subordination for women, what came to light was a breach in the concept of gender that revealed a concept where lesbian women, Black women, Latinas, and poor women did not feel included. There emerged a need for another vision of feminism, one more comprehensive and collective: Afro-feminism. Apart from this problematic, many feminists, who did not have an interest in the power of domination represented by the penis, have chosen lesbianism as a political act or celibacy as a form of opposing a sexual and sexist subordination, (Curiel, 2003).

In order to understand the whole process that leads to the recognition of a lesbian identity from the perspective of Afro-decadence, it is important to analyze all of the fights that, over the years, have confronted feminists in order to be recognized as citizens with

rights. Later, we will touch on some of the contributions of these Afro-feminists like Alice Walker, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Ochy Curiel, and Sueli Carneiro, among others, that have served as references. In Cuba we are already in the process of incorporating these foci, those that we consider to not be distant from our process, as demonstrated in the following discussion. Although we cannot know how many of our population of 11 million are lesbian and bisexual in Cuba, and much less have an idea of how many identify as lesbian, from the little that we know from interviews, we realized that in a space of convergence, the major exclusion is a discussion of lesbophobia.

In relation to racialization, the census shows that the Black population is 1,034,044, of which 491,299 are women and 542,745 are men. Of the population that is mestizo, 1,478,591 are women and 1,494,291 are men, but it is not possible to know how many Black women and mestizos are lesbians. Now, of the ones who have been interviewed in relation to discrimination, all of them refer to having suffered different levels of discrimination and, in one way or another, rejection. In some cases there is a triple stigma: being a woman, Black, and lesbian. Some of these women have received and expressed a strong internalized lesbophobia that moves us to reflect about this theme, that women who are Black, lesbian, and feminist are almost invisible.

Being a Woman and Black

To the women we do not teach ourselves to care about ourselves, why is this?

Self-esteem and loving one's self image logically comes from everyone that gives us value, that is those who reflect the form in which we should care for ourselves, they accept us and they want us, and it is in this way that we learn to make sure that others accept us as we

are, respect our differences, and the specificities of our personality. From the moment we [Black women] were born this has not happened for us, neither the experience of conduct nor have we had a scale of comparison to value ourselves. It is through this process of socialization where every person is going to form their own sense of self-worth and how others see us. The sense of self-worth is not transmitted through genes it is something that is learned.

Self-valuation depends on the experiences that one acquires through the people around them, on the messages that we continue receiving in communication with respect to our value as a person, first within our family, later in school, in media, and in society in general. In this sense, it was Alice Walker that proposed in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* that in looking in the gardens of our grandmothers and great-grandmothers, where at times we are not able to find refuge in remembering an example of profound and intense spirituality, occasionally they were not conscious of the richness that they had. They were not allowed to open those fountains of creativity because at times they were confronted with the realization that their marriages were not about love but economics, or that they did not resist prostitution as an option, or they gave birth to children without being able to feel that they were mothers, but they still showed a history of resistance (Walker, 2005).

These histories are not known, nor are they admired, and the negative valuation that they had of themselves went on accumulating a stress that racism provokes, one that literally affects the brain. Today there are studies that show this. It produces physiological changes in the brain that later cause the person to maintain a negative image of themselves and the continued negative commentaries generate anguish, which results in chemical changes that, fortunately, can be retrained in order to achieve emotional emancipation.

When the feminist bell hooks (2008) wrote her article “Straightening Our Hair,” she established a direct relationship of dependence between hair and self-esteem. She tells, in an unforgettable way, about the smells of the mixture of grease and the hot comb that make the kinky hair of Black people straight like that of White people, in order to achieve the experience of happiness of what was considered beautiful in that period. To have hair straightened was to have been born with good hair. Good hair was already enough to get rid of the aggressive commentaries and low valuation that happens when you’re playing and your hair gets disheveled and you’re told, “tuck in those raisins!,” which at times can come from your own family, or you’re given the nickname “coqui pela,” when your hair is short because it has difficulty growing and does not move with the wind.³

What begins as a joke in school can develop into an internalized racism, the hate of one’s self for having this type of hair. It causes one to feel rejected and disagreeable with this part of the body and without a doubt it does not facilitate a good development of one’s personality and affects one’s self-esteem, physical, and mental health. It is not easy to separate, within the social imaginary, the aesthetic oppression that the culture of White people, from an early age on, have on Black women. Although today, through the work of Black activists aimed at modifying a colonial mentality that is bound with the obsession to have straight hair, and to show a new aesthetic and new political image that has emerged in the love for natural hair (“the afro” as they call it), they are showing cultural resistance in the face of racist oppression. Here we have examples from the studies referred to by bell hooks, where Black students at Spellman College defended the importance of straight hair in order to gain more acceptance in their job searches (hooks, 2008).

³ This is a reference to a bare neck, a place where hair does not grow.

Beyond hair, as a part of the body, there has been an archetype of inferiority for Black people. The way in which their reality has been historically represented has impeded them from developing an identity in which they are proud to be Black, despite their valuable contributions in the wars of independence and their many contributions in the history of the country. The internalization of that which is White as the norm, as the paradigm of that which is human, is still very strong and supports the continued development of prejudices and stereotypes concerning skin color. We continue to have little representation or we are absent from the media and when we are represented, some of the images continue to be those of exclusion, as Manuel Moreno Fraginals argued when he said that slavery distorted the sex life of the enslaved, such as the immorality of the Black woman and the lust of the mulata, myths that are still used as a resource in the development of our image.⁴

In the popular consciousness, to be a Black woman is synonymous with dirt, of amorality, entities without the capacity to think. The Black population, the majority of whom come from poverty, from impoverished areas, from marginalized neighborhoods, this has been used in the construction of certain stereotypes that present us as different, as semi illiterate, of low-income, available for any kind of work related to submission and obedience. We are considered sexual objects, great prostitutes, and good in the bed. The fact that we have not stopped being a vulnerable group makes it difficult to modify this image.

Black women are attacked even when there is a commendable attempt to achieve, “she’s black, but she has a white soul,” or similarly argued by the writer Zuleica Romay when she says, “she is an Althaea,” it’s to say that she is a confection, that she is White inside and covered in chocolate because she is a smart Black woman. Romay’s (2012) book *In Praise of Althaea or the Paradoxes of Raciality* makes visible the absence of racial awareness and how

⁴ Mulatta refers to a woman who is visibly Afro-descendant and racially mixed.

Cubans need to constitute themselves around balancing a hybrid color and culture. These valuations are already almost naturalized and they have limited the possibility for us to realize our identity, of its transcendence as a symbol of continuity and permanence, of peace and wisdom, of creativity capable of flooding material limits and enslavement. Even today we are pressured to create alternative modes of survival.

Being a Black woman comes with a huge cost and if you are a lesbian, it becomes even more apparent the differences in the struggle against patriarchy in relation to White women because you have to take on the fight against colonial domination at a mental level, as well as a history marked by slavery, from which emerged racism. So, as Lorde says in her poem, “Being together as women was not enough. We were different.”

Being a Black Lesbian Woman

The poet Audre Lorde tells us:

Woman
I dream of a place between your breasts
to build my house like a haven
where I plant crops
in your body
an endless harvest
where the commonest rock
is moonstone and ebony opal
giving milk to all of my hungers
and your night comes down upon me
like a nurturing rain. (Lorde, 1997, p. 297)

This poem affirms that the love that lesbians have for each other is equal to between any other couple. So lesbians ask, why does it cost so much to understand something so simple as the idea that love does not know a gender or a color? The sexual/erotic practices between women is a reality that, until now, has cost a lot, given the imposition of an obligatory

heterosexuality, and this, logically, has not permitted many people to see their true beauty and power. The discourse of power that this imposes falls heavily on the bodies and minds of lesbians causing some to become silent and others to fight for the transformation of these difficult realities.

The heterosexual power of society does not only oppress lesbians and gays, but all who appear to be different, like women and men of different classes that experience domination. But the act of recognizing the power of our eroticism as lesbians gives us energy to keep going. What does it mean to be a lesbian? Some of the possible answers appear in Nicaraguan psychologist Mary Bolt Gonzales's (1996) *Simply Different*, where she describes how our subjectivity is constructed, the many discriminations that we experience, and the violence that we suffer. The most frequent answers the author offers are related to the meanings of equality and rights. Identifying oneself as a woman implies not only feelings of help and solidarity, but is also about sharing the same sensibilities, emotions, and expressions of tenderness, while at the same time showing oneself as different because lesbians are not governed by the same values and standards set by society. It is to show the full potential of sexuality and not to close oneself to the world, to live with happiness but also sadness from chaos and familial and social misunderstandings. It is also living underground.

The Cuban lesbians of the group OREMI in Havana also offered similar answers. In their responses, they highlight the self-hatred of having to hide from their families and the difficulty of finding somewhere to live with their partners. The Black women interviewed noted triple discrimination for being a woman, a lesbian, and Black. They consistency shared stories related to the traumas of being lesbians in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood, such as guilt, fear, underestimation, and other difficulties in their lives. But being a lesbian is an act

of liberation from certain roles and brings about a readjustment of consciousness in terms of what has been historically permitted and what has not. It is social demand on the self. Ochy Curiel (2003) argued that taking on a lesbian consciousness means going through a complex process of not being able to fit oneself into the identities that society defines as either feminine or masculine. In this way, Curiel challenges the view of those who believe that being a lesbian means only having sexual relations with other women. In reality it is more than this, it is a political position that challenges obligatory heteronormativity; it is a rejection of the sexual dependence on men, emotionally, economically, and politically (Curiel, 2003).

In this sense, Audre Lorde is saying... “In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censures, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenged, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live” (Lorde, 1984, p. 42). This practice has been demonstrated; lesbians are less likely than heterosexuals to defend their rights and seek the protection of justice against violence, harassment, and discrimination because they cannot count on the support necessary from authorities because they are considered to be less deserving than heterosexuals. Their sexual preference continues to be an issue when they have to confront these struggles.

Recently I shared the experience of a young, Black, very feminine, and professionally well known lesbian who was harassed and assaulted by a man because, being so beautiful, she chose a woman as her partner. Despite the accusations of violence and discrimination that she presented to the authorities, he was granted bail. The initial response was that she was at fault for walking hand in hand with her partner in the street. Although the girl filed a legal appeal to sanction him, still the court continues to delay its findings.

The example above is evidence of the social comportment of hegemonic identity and heteronormativity in the defense of sexual and reproductive rights, which hinders the search for justice, protection, and redress for harms committed. To this must be added the racial prejudice that prevents Black women from being seen as political subjects that are within their rights to have sexual-affective relations with whomever they please. Our everyday life shows how men continue to have the right to invade the privacy of women and how women are obligated to accept these acts against their will. These realities have obliged some lesbians to live clandestinely, a double standard, marrying and having kids in conflict, in confusion, negating the existence of what would really would make them happy, leading them to make concessions in their lives.

In Cuba many women I have interviewed have faced these challenges, not only social rejection, but also being disowned by their families. One of them told me that at fourteen years of age she fell in love with a classmate, she wrote her a letter and the teacher took it. Her mother found out because they called her to the school, she hit her in the middle of the class, and the school expelled her. Her mother also kicked her out of the house. When she tried to kill herself, they sent her to her father's house, he lived in another province, and she never talked with him about her relationships. He forced her to marry a friend who was fifty years old, with whom she had two children. It was a horrible life. She suffered multiple forms of violence and today still has the marks.

To these realities we add Black lesbians who are openly gay, who embody roles and masculine stereotypes (are butch) and who display their virility as a way to conquer in terms of seduction, polygamy, etc. They also face violence from heterosexual women and misunderstanding in a general sense. The accusations and jokes of being a "Black

tomboy/dyke” (*negra marimacha*) are frequent. Heterosexual women cannot forgive these Black women who are free, independent. They have values or attributes that are not understandable in the White hegemonic system.

The roles that they, throughout history, have had to play as Black women are as domestic workers, prostitutes, submissive, socially recognized as erotic symbols. While, within our social system, many have been professionals, sometimes they still make these transactions to support another in poverty. This social disadvantage has yet to be addressed, despite the participation that they have had in improving the society in which we live today. While they look for general solutions to economic problems, they still have yet to deal with the question of race, much less the question of whether a woman is receiving support from a feminist movement.

To be a Black lesbian woman and poor involves the recognition of many more intersections that have to be included in the conceptualization of this body that has been formed as a result of exploitation. It is not only the fight against subordination to men, nor patriarchy, Black women also have to consider the particular experiences that they have to live. The poverty that the majority of Black women face is more complex and we have to address and render visible these realities. We carry with us a difficult history, one that we have had to face in private. Because of this we take on the role of a strong black woman amid these experiences of submission and prejudice.

The Afro-feminists have had to create their own discourse, their own spaces, and have had painful confrontations with White feminists in order to get them to understand the diversity of realities that, from the beginning, they did not take into consideration. It is from this standpoint that Alice Walker (1988) proposed a new concept, Womanism (*Mujerismo*). In

this way, Black women can reclaim solidarity, recuperating those histories that existed even before the emergence of feminism, and from which has developed lesbo-feminism.

These types of ideological-discursive tools were useful in persuading society that we lesbians possess our own identity as a social group. While a discourse of resistance that denounces inequality and social discrimination exists, to which we are subjected for showing our different sexual preferences from the one determined by a patriarchal, heterosexist system and their mechanisms of control, we still encounter sexual repression, obligatory maternity, compulsive heterosexuality, and the sexual division of labor. Now we must face those realities that affect us as Afro-lesbians who are undertaking a process of decolonization and challenge these erroneous concepts. Without a doubt, it is an enormous process. It was for this reason that Sueli Carneiro (2001) argued that we must Blacken feminism and feminize the antiracist struggle in an effort to construct a collective subjectivity. We can only win by confronting it as a collective, seeking sensitivity and awareness of all Black and White women for a real society with social justice.

Some Concluding Thoughts

To face so much discrimination requires a lot of psychological strength. The most rational mechanism to address this is decolonization; liberating oneself from these chains that have been made in history and to look for resources to face them. In sum, discrimination is a problem that has always existed, but all of this can stop if we have the initiative to do so and remember to treat people the way you would want to be treated, respecting the ideas of people, taking into consideration their opinion. As the world devolves, we have to do

something in order to make it stop, we have to stop complaining and start doing something beginning with this slogan: “Equality and respect are values that we ought to learn to use.”

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