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Santa Maria: Sexism and Racism in the Cuban Reality

Harlem Renaissance poet Warren Cuney's poem, "No Images," captures for our imagination's eye and our ears the cross-like dilemma of women of color in this century. Wounded by the double-barrelled shotgun of racism and sexism, our women operate under a burden of enormous proportion. The poem has been translated into numerous foreign tongues; it has been set to music. It is popular because the pain of black women in North America resonates intensely with the pain felt by sisters throughout the world and especially in places where Euro-American standards have been raised up as normative for what it means to be female. Let the poem speak for itself:

She does not know
Her beauty.
She thinks that her brown body
Has no glory.

If she could dance
Naked 'neath palm trees,
And see her image in the river,
Then she would know.

But there are no palm trees
On the street.
And dishwater gives back
No images.

In Cuba, the Protestant church which we visited, though working to transform itself, still gives back to its own women no images of themselves in glory. Maria Hermina's story is typical. She is a plump, graying woman in her early 50's who has shared ministry with her husband, Roberto, for the last twenty-one years. Together, they have served both an urban congregation in Havana and a rural mission station. Maria, like

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Roberto, was seminary trained. Both hold degrees in theological education. Nevertheless, her degree led not to ordination but to a successful marriage to a minister. Many women of her generation and of generations past have responded to God's call to ministry with this choice. Because the idea of becoming a minister with all the duties, rights, and privileges would have been too radical a thought, many women have comforted themselves with the role of the minister's wife. Maria found work within this revolutionary state on a factory assembly line making paint and gasoline cans and pots and pans. Never far from the kitchen, at home or on the job, her wonderfully curious and ever-probing mind, yearning to reach out to a larger world, is limited to random contacts with international visitors and to her congregation with whom she struggles patiently to practice her English. Occasionally she has the rare opportunity, like the recent Martin Luther King, Jr. Seminar, for greater contact. At this recent event she, an unpaid laborer for the church, attended two workshops as an unofficial observer.

The church mirrors the culture in which it finds itself. So it was not surprising to find another Maria wandering along the beach ten miles outside of the capital at Santa Maria on a hot, sun-baked Sunday. In halting syllables, through sand drawings, and sighs she communicated that her thin, red-brown body and close-cropped, kinky hair have been sources of pain and anguish for her; even in this revolutionary state. Having been rejected by both of her handsome, mulatto parents, as some sort of genetic throwback of which they were ashamed, Maria began searching for love and acceptance—a mirror which would image her beauty. She had one brief marriage at the age of sixteen and continues to seek solace in the eyes and arms of men who hold her, however briefly, with the promise and the hope that her reflection is somehow pleasing to them. May it be that she will be the beneficiary of the trickle down effect of Cuba's renewed appreciation for and interest in its African roots; that her beauty may someday be acknowledged and known by all.

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There is a river which begins, perhaps in the Gambia, whose waters flow through the Nile of Egypt and the swift currents of the Amazon, through the Mississippi in the United States, through the Caribbean, including the harbor of Havana.

There is no question of the African presence in Cuba. Women and men, some of whom preserve physically and spiritually an almost pure yet alloyed form of African culture, bear the genetic memory of their forebears whose labor was expended on this island.

The men and women of El Sabado De Rhumba gather every Saturday to sing, dance, entertain, teach, and keep alive the Yoruba rhythms—the words and the beat. In the crowd there are women whose primary task is to assure the accuracy of the transmission of the folk tradition. They

may be the same women who gather in the small indigenous churches on Sunday to ensure the faithful passing on of the religious tradition as well. As with people of the African Diaspora in other places, religion and life, life and culture, are inseparable.

Before the Cuban revolution of 1959, these men and women lived in a society which was stratified by skin color. The more Spanish or European blood one had, the lighter the skin. The lighter the skin, the more socially acceptable the person. The church reflected this social norm. Even there, among the Body of Christ, white skin increased one's chances of acceptance into the church, if not into heaven. Yet black religion flourished, growing in the shaded corners of pre-revolutionary Cuba, symbolized by Santeria dolls, orisha and sacred markings on the face.

The revolution brought the promise of a classless, raceless society. Those for whom this promise was a curse left for other places. Former members of the poorer classes found access to influence and dignity. The biographies of some of the leaders of the Communist Party tell strikingly similar tales of growing up proud, poor, religious and with a keen sense of social consciousness. Some people even returned to Cuba after the revolution believing that this society held the promise of a committed but not elaborate life. One of our translators, Rosalie, spent most of her life in New York but returned to Cuba to be a part of the revolutionary process. The majority of Afro-Cubans, however, just stayed. Able to speak only the language of their captors, like their brothers and sisters in the United States, and, therefore, unable to physically return to the source of the river that nurtured them, they survived in this Caribbean tributary.

Blackness in Cuba does not convey the same connotations that it does in the United States. Many black people in Cuba are not reluctant to identify themselves as Cubans rather than black. This may be the result of the deliberate effort on the part of the government to ensure that racism never becomes the incendiary device for a new revolution. One high ranking official of the Communist Party of Cuba went so far as to suggest that to be Cuban is to be black. He said that there are no white people in Cuba. Every Cuban has some African blood. Therefore, he concluded, you can tell who is Cuban by watching how they react to the beat of the African drums. The Cuban people may, indeed, be meztitos or a mixed race as some claim. But whether the value of the ingredient of blackness will be fully acknowledged remains to be seen.

Standing guard over the harbor of Havana is a white statue of Christ. It was originally constructed to assure the safe passage of ships laden with human and mineral cargo. Under the shadow of this Christ, on a

hot, sun-baked Sunday, wandering along the beach some ten miles distant, Maria searches for her image. Whom will the white Christ beautify? Upon whom will he bestow sainthood and virtue? Maria, perhaps we shall yet hear your Magnificat.