

Dark Ambivalence: Resurgent Stereotypes of Afro-Cuban Masculinity

En el contexto de la Cuba pos-soviética, cuando el incremento del turismo internacional a la isla a partir de los años 90 ha conllevado una explosión de la industria del sexo, las novelas Los palacios distantes (2002), de Abilio Estévez, y El Rey de la Habana (1999), de Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, construyen personajes que se aproximan al perfil del trabajador sexual masculino con tendencias violentas. La caracterización estereotípica del hombre negro como hiperviril y violento encuentra sus precursores en la sociedad esclavista. Este artículo analiza la ambivalencia en las representaciones de la masculinidad afrocubana en las novelas de Estévez y Gutiérrez, en las que la presentación crítica de los estereotipos perjudiciales se ve complicada por la relación entre la producción cultural cubana y el mercado internacional que la consume. En estas novelas, y en otras obras referidas aquí, se observa la cosificación sexuada del cuerpo varonil afrocubano como un agente de violencia que combate prácticas sociales discriminatorias, a la vez que evidencia la perduración de las mismas.

Fue entonces que aquel negro enorme,
terror y delicia de las viejas y blancas
vaginas reprimidas del lugar subió al techo
más alto y sin decir siquiera: regresé, sacó su
miembro descomunal...

Alberto Pedro, *Manteca*

...that effect of probabilistic truth and
predictability which, for the stereotype,
must always be in excess of what can be
empirically proved or logically construed.

Homi Bhabha

An untitled 1994 photograph by Afro-Cuban artist René Peña shows a side view of the artist's nude body from mid-abdomen to mid-thigh. The left hand, nearer the viewer, rests on top of the buttocks, dorsal side down and palm up with fingers curling back toward the wrist in an evocative ape-like pose. His extended right index finger carefully touches the pointed tip of a

dagger that protrudes from between his legs, angled slightly upward, a proxy for an erect penis. In another self-portrait by Peña, *Samurai* (2009), a full-body frontal view of a muscular man with dreadlocks stands against a dark background, the figure bows his head while holding a samurai sword, the long blade pointed down parallel to his legs, reaching nearly to the ground. The man's genitals are obscured only by shadow, drawing the viewer's gaze to search for his dark sex near the center of the image. Both photographs associate black male sexuality with a threat of violence, and both identify black male subjects largely in relation to their penises, which these images substitute with metal blades. At stake in Peña's photographic work is the longstanding, multidimensional ambivalence toward stereotypes of black men as hypersexual and violently threatening, an ambivalence particularly evident in narrative representations of black masculinity in the novels *El Rey de la Habana* (1999) by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez and *Los palacios distantes* (2002) by Abilio Estévez.

As the history of slavery underlies the creation and reception of these visual and textual images, their interpretation necessitates an historical perspective. In her book *The Bodies that Were Not Ours*, Cuban-American writer and performance artist Coco Fusco notes, "Black people's entry into the symbolic order of Western culture hinged on the theft of their bodies, the severing of will from their bodies, the reduction of their bodies to things, and the transformation of their sexuality into an expression of otherness" (5). Fusco's argument convincingly implies the inextricability of race from sex as she affirms that the history of black experiences in the diaspora has produced lasting anxiety about the representation of the black body in the arts, pointing as one example to the 1989 *Constructs* series by African-American photographer Lyle Ashton Harris whose nude self-portraits, like Peña's, represent what it means to be "raced" through the gesture of offering his body as subject and object.

Though the representations of Afro-Cuban men in the novels by Estévez and Gutiérrez are not self-portraits, I submit that they constitute critical objectifications of black bodies for reasons somewhat analogous to Coco Fusco's interpretation of Lyle Ashton Harris's images: the linking of black male identity to stereotypical traits makes plain the process of racialization by constructing Afro-Cuban masculinity according to preexisting conceptions of what it means to be a black man.¹ Estévez's *Los palacios distantes*, Gutiérrez's *El Rey de la Habana*, and other cultural works project common characterizations of Afro-Cuban men according to associations between blackness and threatening hyper-virility.² When viewed through the lens of enslavement, sexualized objectifications of black male bodies are paradoxically marked by both the historical victimization of people of African descent in the Americas and by their

presentation as potential perpetrators of violence. The stereotypically constructed Afro-Cuban male characters of Estévez's and Gutiérrez's novels are at once victims and perpetrators, erotically objectified and violently threatening, contemporary embodiments of prejudicially conceived slave masculinities reemerging in the context of a post-Soviet Cuba newly saturated by sexual tourism, literal and literary. Considering Fusco's argument that the legacy of enslavement is inevitably emblazoned on contemporary representations of black bodies, nineteenth-century precedents, such as the slave character Francisco, will illuminate the way sexualization connotes violence in the masculinity of the male Afro-Cuban figures under study here.³

The title protagonist Rey (Reynaldo) of *El Rey de la Habana* and the pivotal secondary character El Negro Piedad of *Los palacios distantes* both use their sexualized bodies to their economic advantage, loosely fitting the profile of the post-Soviet *pinguero*, as male sex workers are most commonly known in Cuba. *El Rey de la Habana* narrates in squalid detail Rey's struggle for daily survival amidst extreme material hardship following the crisis of the 1990s when the dissolution of the Soviet Union eviscerated Cuba's economic base. *Los palacios distantes* presents El Negro Piedad as the jealous pimp of Salma, a prostitute and one of the trio of homeless protagonists who wander the streets of Havana giving impromptu performances of Cuba's cultural patrimony while evading the menacing El Negro Piedad. My analysis bears in mind an obvious and troublesome question: Is the sexualized objectification of (violent) black masculinity in cultural work a critical response to discriminatory social practices, which these representations seek to undo; or are these representations evidence of residual prejudice in a post-colonial Cuba where black bodies continue to be portrayed and viewed as the ontological other of hegemonic "whites"?

The answer depends not only on the representations inscribed in the texts but also on the reader's situation and the awareness s/he brings to the text. Both *Los palacios distantes* and *El Rey de la Habana* were initially published in Spain and have been translated to English, French, and German. Only *El Rey de la Habana* has also been published in Cuba. While readers' language and national origin certainly do not predetermine their reading experiences, it is worth noting that a high percentage of the readership of Estévez's and Gutiérrez's novels would be unlikely to have first-hand knowledge of Cuban socio-historical contexts. Let us consider two hypothetical readers of these images, which I will imprecisely call the consuming touristic reader and the critical reader.⁴ The consuming touristic reader accepts the stereotypical representations passively, taking them at face value without questioning whether they are what they appear

to be, one-dimensional portrayals of Afro-Cuban men that play on exoticizing stereotypes of race and sex. This reader draws pleasure from the texts' gritty eroticism, perpetuating the commodification of non-white Cuban bodies. In contrast, the critical reader recognizes stereotypes as stereotypes and questions whether their deployment might carry a subversive function not apparent at first glance. This reader may arrive at the conclusion I have tentatively stated as my hypothesis, that the overt stereotyping of black masculinity in Estévez's and Gutiérrez's novels indirectly combats, by exposing, the very processes of racialization and sexualization that produce these prejudicial stereotypes. Stanley Fish reminds us that texts emerge only in situations and that the assumptions one brings into a given situation necessarily affect the meaning of the text in the view of that individual or interpretive community (317-21). Following Fish, the representations of black male characters as violent and hypersexed in the novels by Gutiérrez and Estévez can and do function critically to combat racism for a certain set of aware readers, even if the ambivalence deeply engrained in the (re)production and reception of the images allows space for alternative readings to fetishize *pinguero*-like Afro-Cuban men.

Los palacios distantes by Estévez and *El Rey de la Habana* by Gutiérrez take place in the wake of the widespread deprivations of the post-Soviet economic crisis of the 1990s known as the Special Period in Times of Peace. The Special Period produced lasting and uneven effects correlated to race and sex by exposing persisting inequalities that were less visible in preceding decades after the 1959 Revolution. Alejandro de la Fuente documents measureable increases in racial discrimination and economic inequality for black and mulatto Cubans during the Special Period in which, among other paradigmatic shifts, the exponential growth of state-sponsored international tourism to the island was accompanied by a boom in the sex industry.⁵ In *El Rey de la Habana*, Rey returns to the city in 1997 at age 16 after spending three years in a juvenile detention facility under suspicion of having caused the coincidental, tragic deaths of his mother, brother, and grandmother, an episode that opens the novel's narration. The first place Rey goes upon his release is to the Malecón where he observes male and female prostitutes waiting for "un turista incauto y melancólico" (40). The proliferation of sexual tourism during the years Rey was incarcerated thus frames the mulatto protagonist's sexual relationships in the text. Likewise in *Los palacios distantes*, all of El Negro Piedad's sexual activity takes place in the context of his role as a sex worker. The sexual tourism industry in Cuba disproportionately employs/exploits Afro-Cuban men and women as *pingueros* and *jineteras*, respectively, marketing their bodies as a tropicalist fantasy to foreign

clients (Cabezas 80-83). While academic writing often remits to the less vulgar word *jinetero*, *pinguero* is the more commonly used colloquial label for men who prostitute their bodies.⁶ They tend to be black or mulatto, and their clients are most frequently foreign, white male tourists, though *pingueros* may or may not consider themselves to be gay and may cater to female clients instead of or in addition to male ones.

Though Rey only once has indirect contact with foreigners, his first relationship with a 52-year-old Cuban woman named Fredesbinda typifies the way Rey uses his sexually objectified body for economic survival as if he were a *pinguero*. Fredesbinda gives Rey food, clean clothes, and a bath. While he is bathing, she fixates on his penis: “¡Oh, qué pinga más linda! La agarró con las dos manos, apretando. Le sobó los huevos. Era una espléndida y gruesa tranca de veintidós centímetros, de un color canela bien oscuro, con una pelambreira negra y brillante” (48). While the text identifies Rey as mulatto, and while it is certainly true that racial identifications in the Hispanic Caribbean typically reflect more nuance with regard to shades of skin color than is the case in the US, for example, where any phenotypic indication of African descent tends to result in identification as “black,” the above description of Rey’s genitals shifts from the “dark cinnamon” shade of his penis to the blackness of his pubic hair in a manner that conflates his mulatto racial identification with black masculinity. “Black” and “mulatto” here become, arguably, interchangeable when analyzing stereotypically constructed traits of Afro-Cuban masculinity in *El Rey de la Habana*. 16-year-old Rey and 52-year-old Fredesbinda have sex several times a day, scenes that are narrated in explicit, pornographic language, a common feature of the post-Soviet ‘dirty realism’ championed by Gutiérrez.⁷ Rey’s sexual experiences with Fredesbinda teach him to use his stereotypical hyper-virility, marked by the color and size of his penis, in a relationship that is based not on mutual affection but rather on his ability to gratify another person, who in return fulfills Rey’s material needs for food and shelter.

The episode shows how race, sex, and class mutually constitute one another in a *pinguero*-like figure. The intersecting identifications of mulatto, male, and poor articulate together to result in something greater (or rather less) than the sum of its parts.⁸ Neither El Negro Piedad of *Los palacios distantes* nor Rey of *El Rey de la Habana* is exactly a *pinguero* because neither earns a living by prostituting himself. Yet I consider them *pinguero*-like because both use sex for economic gain and are characterized strongly by the special capacities of their eroticized bodies to give sexual pleasure to others, female and male, Cuban and foreign, for something in return. El Negro Piedad is a heterosexual pimp who once during Estévez’s novel has sex with two German men for pay and often

uses his sexual prowess as a mechanism to obtain what he wants from both men and women who are attracted to him, including the protagonists Victorio and Salma. Salma succinctly categorizes El Negro Piedad's sexual orientation as straight but gay-for-pay by stating, "[A]demás, te aclaro, él sólo complace a hombres con dinero, así que..." (217). Like El Negro Piedad, Rey is manifestly straight but enters into non-heteronormative sexual arrangements when they are economically advantageous.

Rey's willingness to exchange sex for material needs pushes him from one relationship to the next. Of Rey's seven sexual partners in the novel, six are women, and one is a transgender person who goes by Sandra. More than any other of his sexual relationships, Rey's association with Sandra characterizes him as a *pinguero*-like figure because the economic motives behind his sexual activity so obviously outweigh the role of feelings of attraction in the establishment and maintenance of the relationship. The night they meet, Rey is asleep on a staircase and wakes up to Sandra masturbating him through a hole in his pants. Sandra takes Rey down the hall to her immaculate apartment with food in improbable abundance, an idyllic escape from Special Period deprivations. Rey is at first shocked by the comparable luxury of Sandra's home, which is just a few steps away but a world apart from the squalor in which his girlfriend Magda lives. Like Fredesbinda before, Sandra bathes, feeds, and clothes Rey; and then they have sex multiple times in graphic narrative detail. Attempting to ignore Sandra's penis, Rey is aroused by her breasts, which she has developed by taking hormone pills intended for menopausal women. But Rey seems much more aroused by the material comforts Sandra provides in exchange for his sexual services.

El Rey de la Habana creates contradictory messages regarding the relative morality of sexualized economic exchange, especially when the "buyers" are non-Cuban. The closest Rey comes to prostituting himself for cash is when he allows two older foreign men to watch him have sex with one of his girlfriends named Katia. Katia's brother Cheo, a professional *pinguero*, arranges the meeting and pays them each fifty dollars. Pleased with Rey's performance on this occasion, Cheo tells Rey that a Norwegian woman is coming in a month to marry him and take him back to Europe with her. Cheo claims the Norwegian will have friends and that Rey can pair himself with one and leave Cuba too: "Oye, las yumas son enfermas a los negros y a los mulatos. Como tú y como yo. Y tú tienes un pingón que vale una fortuna. ¡Es oro lo que tienes entre las patas! ¡Oro puro!" (111).⁹ Cheo readily commodifies his own non-white body with the hope of leaving Cuba. In spite of Cheo telling him that his penis is "pure gold" with which he can buy his way off the island for a life abroad whenever he wishes, Rey insists that he will not leave Havana.

Rey's antipathy to emigrating goes against the typical attitude of *pingueros* and *jineteras* who often, like Cheo, aspire to a life abroad through marriage to a tourist. Cheo's embrace of his own sexual objectification is indicative of the ambivalence at play in representations of black masculinity in the context of a global marketplace that fetishizes exoticized blackness, a phenomenon Peter Wade analyzes in an historical perspective in contrast to Latin American indigenous sexuality:

[B]lack (African and African diaspora) sexuality became an international icon/fetish and a capitalist commodity in a complex conjuncture of a) abolitionism, which spoke of the iniquities of rape, sexual abuse and the denial of a proper masculine role to black men; b) racial domination in the US and in European empires in Africa in which the sexuality of black people was a constant concern; and c) currents of artistic and literary primitivism from the late nineteenth century, which mystified and commodified black sexuality. (185-86)

His representation a product of these colonial and post-colonial currents, Cheo ironically offers his mulatto body as sexual merchandise in a transaction that he sees as if he were the buyer of a life abroad rather than the purchased sex object. In contrast, Rey denounces foreign tourists to Cuba as "más hijoputa que nosotros" (83).

The way that Rey judges foreigners with money as morally corrupt is ironic both because the novel's horrific conclusion (to be addressed shortly) showcases Rey's own utter lack of moral orientation and because the publication of the novel itself caters to a paying, foreign audience, even if Rey as a character does not. The Barcelona-based Editorial Anagrama published *El Rey de la Habana* in 1999. Though Rey never has sex with tourists visiting Cuba, Gutiérrez's novel itself "sells" sexualized, racialized images of Cuban bodies to the foreign readers who purchase the book. Esther Whitfield (11-12) discusses "the new Cuban boom" – of which Gutiérrez's novels form a central part – literature produced since the post-Soviet 1990s and published primarily through Spanish houses such as Seix Barral, Tusquets, Planeta, Anagrama, and Alfaguara, which tends to showcase to non-Cuban audiences the material deprivations of daily life in Cuba in the 1990s as culturally fashionable. Whitfield underscores that the writers of this post-Soviet fiction are largely "physically separated from the circles in which their books were read" and that in the case of the US readership, literature serves "as a stand-in for, rather than an extension of, a tourist's experience, given the restraints on travel imposed by the embargo against Cuba" (13-14). Despite his insistence to remain in Cuba, because he is inscribed in Gutiérrez's words printed on Spanish paper and shipped to an international audience, Rey *does* travel abroad, and

foreigners *do* exchange money for his sexually objectified non-white body when purchasing and reading the novel. Therein lies the danger that touristic readings of stereotypes of black masculinity might further the marginalization of Afro-Cuban men as a sexual fetish for desirous consumers of Cuban culture and Cuban bodies.

The sexual pleasure Rey can provide to others is the basis for the title pun that identifies him as the King of Havana. Rey's most lasting partner Magda, a prostitute who sells peanuts on the street, asserts, "Desde niña me acostumbré a los negros con sus pingones bien prietos, grandes y gordos ... como tú, papi, tú tienes una pinga lindísima. Verdad que eres El Rey de la Habana" (59). Magda's words create a quasi-synecdochic relationship between Afro-Cuban men and a stereotypically large penis. The passage also, again, conflates "mulatto" and "black" racial identifiers by labeling Rey black when referencing his exaggerated masculinity. The first time the novel identifies Rey in racial terms, it is in the context of his body being sexually objectified, when an older boy attempts to rape him in the showers of the juvenile detention facility where Rey spends three years: "A los tres o cuatro días de estar allí un negro dos años mayor que él, fuerte y grande, le mostró la pinga en las duchas. Una pinga grandísima. Se le acercó abanicándose aquel animal con la mano derecha: 'Mira, mulatico, ¿te gusta este animal? Tú tienes unas nalgas lindas'" (17). The third person narrator describes the older boy's penis as an enormous "animal," expressing a discriminatory stereotype of black masculinity as a kind of glorified sexual savagery. The boy in turn concurrently racializes and eroticizes Rey's naked body through the word "mulatico." Tellingly, the hyper masculinity connected to the large black penis belongs only to the aggressor, which is not Rey in this confrontation. In all future sexual encounters in the text, Rey assertively takes the dominant role, exposing/perpetuating the racist conception of black male agency as violently virile.

The stereotype of black men as hyper-virile with violent tendencies traces to one of two "types" of slave masculinity identified by David Greven. Analyzing enslaved men in North American fiction, Greven describes the possibilities for representing black male sexuality in slaveholding society as being split between "the supersexual stud and the sexual 'savage' on the one hand, or the delicate, fragile and exotic 'oriental' on the other" (172). In Cuban literature of the nineteenth century, Juan Francisco Manzano's self portrayal in his 1839 *Autobiografía* and his fictional avatar Francisco of Anselmo Suárez y Romero's 1839 novel *Francisco, el ingenio o las delicias del campo* seem initially to fit the latter of Greven's two types. Robert Richmand Ellis argues that narrations of torture in both Manzano's autobiography and Suárez y Romero's

Francisco strongly associate physical abuse of male slaves with the idea of sexual abuse by their white masters.¹⁰ Suárez y Romero's novel, which was inspired by Manzano's autobiography, twice points out that the first thing to happen to Francisco upon his arrival at the *ingenio* from Havana was that he was forcibly undressed.¹¹ The exposing of Francisco's body underscores his lack of rights to his own sexuality.

The sexualized objectifications of the bodies of Juan Francisco Manzano and Suárez y Romero's Francisco serve as historical-literary predecessors for contemporary representations of stereotypes of black masculinity, including those contained in the novels *El Rey de la Habana* and *Los palacios distantes*. In the latter part of *Francisco*, the protagonist morphs from exotically docile to savagely threatening, from one of Greven's two types to the other, following his forced relocation from Havana to the *ingenio*. When his lover Dorotea – a mulatta slave who remains desperately in love with Francisco, the father of her infant daughter – visits the sugar plantation, the sight of Francisco's abused, almost naked body convinces even Dorotea that he might be capable of any number of immoral or violent, transgressive acts. It seems that the visual difference of his well-dressed body in Havana versus his exposed body on the *ingenio* signifies for Dorotea a likely difference in Francisco's moral capacity. When stripped of the neat European-style uniform of a *calesero*, the exposed masculinity of the abused black slave on the plantation appears to Dorotea, and to the white slave owners, to be almost certainly guilty of the menacing violence of which he has been wrongfully accused by Dorotea's jealous white master. Francisco's nineteenth-century novelistic transformation thus foregrounds contemporary links between sexualization and violence in black male figures.

Although problematic portrayals of the same stereotypes that characterize Francisco's slave masculinity resurface with particular intensity in the post-Soviet era, Humberto Solás's film *Lucía* (1968) shows that these stereotypes were present in the cultural imaginary of the early post-Revolutionary period when equality for Afro-Cuban citizens was still part of an explicit government agenda, official rhetoric from the 1960s through the 1980s insisting that socialist reforms since 1959 had eliminated discrimination on the basis of race or sex.¹² *Lucía* tells the stories of three Cuban women at three different time periods in the 1890s, 1930s, and 1960s and includes a battle scene that takes place in 1895 at a coffee plantation where fighters in the war for independence have been living in hiding and from where they stage an attack on the Spanish. During the battle a group of black *mambí* fighters comes to the aid of the white *criollos*. Like their white counterparts, the black *mambises* ride horses and wield swords. However, in contrast to the whites, the black fighters are completely nude.

The film portrays the blacks as physically strong, fearless men who overpower the white Spanish loyalists they attack, and the visual presentation links the nude black male body to the idea of physical violence in a way that does not occur with the clothed bodies of the white fighters.

While historical *mambises* (former slaves who joined the fight for independence) were indeed known to fight without clothing, their nude presentation in the 1968 film holds significance for the way a twentieth-century audience perceives the black male body. John Mraz interprets the *mambises'* lack of clothing in *Lucía* as more than simply a historically accurate detail:

Here, their nakedness not only differentiates them visually but is a commentary both on the economic deprivation of their class and race as well as their 'naturalness,' as opposed to the sexual repression of the other groups. It is also an important example of the dramatic uses of historical veracity. The *mambises* often did fight naked – a tactic which terrified the Spanish forces.

Originally a pejorative identifier for black fighters for independence first on the island of Santo Domingo and then in Cuba, Spanish soldiers coined the term *mambí* from a word of African origin “to suggest that they were all bandits and criminals” before it was later “assumed by the blacks themselves as a badge of honour” (Gott 73).¹³ The *mambises* of the film *Lucía* are not criminals at all but participants in the effort to establish Cuba as an independent nation. Even so, their appearance in *Lucía* as ruthless, naked fighters is marked by the ambivalence attached to stereotypes even when represented in works with a strong pro-equality, anti-discrimination vein.

In suggesting similarities between contemporary sexualized objectifications of black men's bodies and the historical commodification of slave bodies, I do not wish to create an equivalency between the two scenarios. The circumstances that enabled the sale of raced bodies during the slave trade were certainly distinct from the social factors in operation surrounding discriminatory objectifications of such bodies today. Nevertheless, I argue that residual elements of the slave-holding past shape the treatment of black male bodies in contemporary literary and artistic works.¹⁴ Homi Bhabha insists that “it is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency” and that the ambivalence engrained in stereotype “ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in excess of what

can be empirically proved or logically construed" (66). This force of ambivalence in stereotyping, I suggest, triply draws the *pinguero*-like profiles of Rey and El Negro Piedad close to preceding imaginings of slave masculinity, facilitates their problematic marketing to touristic cultural consumers of Cuban bodies, and simultaneously opens the space in which critical readers interpret these stereotypical representations as a possible mode of resistance to further discrimination by making visible the "excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed."

The history of slavery quite literally foregrounds the action of Estévez's performative novel *Los palacios distantes* and its presentation of El Negro Piedad's black male body as excessively sexualized and violent. When the protagonists Victorio, Salma, and Don Fuco initially enter the theater, partly in ruins, that will be their home until the climactic double murder of Don Fuco and El Negro Piedad at the novel's conclusion, the narration underscores the interplay between the shadow of the past and the creative work of the present through a description of the proscenium arch that frames the theater's stage: "En el arco-proscenio, esa mezcla de león, cabra y serpiente que forma la Quimera, símbolo de las gloriosas exaltaciones de la imaginación. Junto al monstruo, hermosa Oshún levita sobre la barca castigada por el temporal. Las nueve musas sostienen el manto de la Virgen, al tiempo que negritos caleseros levantan las clámides de las musas" (93). The ornamental figures of black *calesero* slaves on the proscenium arch indirectly bring slave bodies into the novel's action at the dawn of the twenty-first century. When El Negro Piedad enters the scene, the characterization of the contemporary black male figure overlays the lingering stereotype of slave masculinity that Greven describes as "the supersexual stud and the sexual 'savage'" (172). Among the first words used to describe El Negro Piedad are the superlatives "hombrazo" and "mulatón" (48), which link the character's non-whiteness to his larger-than-life manhood. El Negro Piedad's raw masculinity imbues him with almost mystical powers of sexual attraction:

Como al parecer necesitaban experimentar la dureza, las manos de Salma fueron en busca del centro del cuerpo del Negro, allí donde se concentraba toda su sangre. Dándose cuenta, él adelantó la pelvis para que ella tocara. La penetró con la admirable mezcla de brutalidad y de exquisitez, de impiedad y misericordia, que era su más acabada pericia, su refinamiento. (194)

El Negro Piedad's extreme sexual skill, portrayed as irresistible to Salma, is paradoxically characterized as a form of refined brutality.

The black male's hyper-inflated sexual prowess here constitutes his primary mode of agency. Daniel Black, in his study of North American

historical and literary sources, traces the way the sexuality of black men was a locus for contestation under slavery: "The idea of manhood that enslaved men of the nineteenth century came to embrace subconsciously rested upon one's sexual virility. This seems logical, for the black man's penis was the only aspect of his maleness which the captor had not usurped" (126). In his re-reading of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Gerard Aching understands "the slave's work not only as forced labor but also as the psychic work of grappling with internalized forms of oppression" (916). The continuation of this psychic struggle is evident some three decades after US abolition in W. E. B. Du Bois's description of "a world which yields [the black person] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (3), to which I would add "and desire and fear." The following statement by Bhabha in his analysis of Fanon seems to speak to the origins of Du Bois's double-consciousness: "The white man's eyes break up the black man's body and in that act of epistemic violence its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed" (42). If black male slaves found some limited mastery over their own bodies by embracing stereotypical conceptions of black virility, their ambivalent perception of their own power was a result of "epistemic violence" by a white view of enslaved bodies, a violence whose legacy endures in the pain inscribed in Du Bois's double-consciousness and that extends to the representation in *Los palacios distantes* of the black male's penis as the concentrated source of his masculine agency whose power is limited to "brutal" acts of sexual gratification.

Recognition of this link between the power encoded in black virility and the subhuman legal status of enslaved individuals in the past foregrounds my interpretation of the violent tendencies of black male characters in *Los palacios distantes* and *El Rey de la Habana*. In Estévez's *Los palacios distantes* the homeless trio of Victorio, Salma, and Don Fuco bind together to wander the streets of Havana at the margins of society and take refuge in an abandoned theater. The novel inscribes itself with a metafictional existence, affirming, "En el principio fue el teatro" (96). Together they "rehearse" the rituals of daily life: "Por las mañanas, Salma y Victorio disfrutaban los ensayos de Don Fuco, verlo preparar el espectáculo" (152). The climactic conclusion proves to be the main performance for which the characters have been unwittingly preparing. In the middle of the stage, El Negro Piedad murders Don Fuco in pursuit of Salma, whom he desires to bring back under his control, disrupting the integrity of the community unit formed by the trio of protagonists. Salma responds by

killing El Negro Piedad with the bronze bust of José Martí, foundational Cuban writer and leader of the wars for independence, which sits on the stage of the abandoned theater throughout the time the protagonists reside there. The symbolically charged likeness of the benevolent white patriarch and protector of the Cuban nation thus eliminates the threat to the impromptu community posed by the nefarious black aggressor. Ironically, Martí's famous essays "Nuestra América" (1891) and "Mi raza" (1893) employ strong egalitarian language to urge for political unification across racial groups in Cuba and Latin America at the end of the nineteenth century. It is as if Martí himself, in this penultimate scene of Estévez's 2002 novel, demonstrates the insufficiency of his anti-racist rhetoric in the face of persistent, discriminatory stereotyping at the opening of the twenty-first century as embodied by El Negro Piedad.

Estévez's *Los palacios distantes* perhaps presents the stereotype of violent black masculinity somewhat less critically than does Gutiérrez's *El Rey de la Habana*. Unlike in Gutiérrez's novel, where the Afro-Cuban male is the title character, in *Los palacios distantes* El Negro Piedad is not part of the protagonist trio but is instead the novel's clear antagonist, a deadly threat to the other characters that they must overcome. After El Negro Piedad shoots Don Fuco and is bludgeoned to death by Salma, Victorio, the gay white man, and Salma the *jinetera* prepare to reenter the city of Havana. Looking toward the future, the novel concludes by blending Victorio's voice with the narrator's:

Salma lo vio erguirse, ridículo y hermoso, con su traje y su repentina alegría. Ahora nos toca a nosotros, respondió él convencido. Y, en efecto, a sus pies, dormida aún bajo la lluvia, se hubiera dicho que La Habana era la única ciudad del mundo preparada para acogerlos. También parecía la única superviviente de cuatro largos siglos de fracasos, plagas y derrumbes. (272)

In a scene that recalls the foundational romances of nineteenth-century Latin America in which the consolidation of heterosexual family units allegorically signifies national formation, often across existing societal boundaries, the sexual incompatibility of gay Victorio and straight Salma means that they cannot be the productive founders of a new biological generation of Cubans. *Los palacios distantes* concludes with a juxtaposition of Victorio's optimism against an unforgiving cityscape. "Now it's our turn," he states, even though the "failures, plagues, and collapses" (272) of Havana's past four centuries seem on the verge of swallowing the pair whole. Nonetheless, Victorio and Salma reenter the city, convinced that they must proceed together, probably to inculcate new recruits with the cultural memory they rehearse daily in the ruined theatre and in Havana's

streets, as they used to do under Don Fuco's guidance, the sexualized brute El Negro Piedad no longer a danger to them.

In parallel to *Los palacios distantes*, Rey, provoked by an insult to his masculinity, brutally murders his lover Magda at the conclusion of *El Rey de la Habana* and then, in one of many repugnant scenes of the novel, alternates between having sex with her corpse and sitting on her abdomen. Rey dumps Magda's body in the Havana landfill and subsequently dies of a fever contracted from the bites of rats that swarm them both. It is an unspeakably pessimistic vision. In parallel to the concluding pairing of Salma and Victorio in *Los palacios distantes*, this episode graphically represents the total lack of hope that Rey and Magda could give life to a new generation in the distorted version of Havana they inhabit, a fictionalized city full of filth and moral decay. Notably, the narration of *El Rey de la Habana's* tragic conclusion focalizes on Rey's large, erect penis as an instrument of violence.

Rebecca Biron analyzes male-on-female murder in twentieth-century Latin American literature that narrates "the impossibility of idyllic unions in a region with conflictive, diverse populations and histories" (3).¹⁵ Nineteenth-century foundational literary romances from throughout Latin America encode citizenship as male and associate masculinity with domination of the allegorically feminized land. Departing from this history, Biron's study of masculinity in Latin American novels produced during and after the Boom period imagines "new roles for male citizens in the context of postcolonial politics" (6), in part by questioning the idea that masculine virility is proved through symbolic and physical sexist violence. The issue of race in the Cuban novels by Gutiérrez and Estévez adds another layer to Biron's insights on murderous masculinity in Latin American fiction. Unlike the protagonists in Biron's examination, the violent black virility that proves to be the undoing of the dystopic family units in *El Rey de la Habana* and *Los palacios distantes* does not seem to find an alternative, constructive manifestation for Afro-Cuban men in a society that links black masculinity intrinsically to violence. Instead, it evidences the illogical excess inherent to stereotyping.

In spite of its shocking end, *El Rey de la Habana* portrays its black male protagonist in a nuanced way as both a violent assailant and also a tragic victim of the violence he instigates. Rey's fate is a social tragedy that traces to the position of structural disadvantage into which he was born as a poor mulatto in a Cuban society that, particularly in the wake of the economic crisis of the 1990s, has failed to achieve its egalitarian ideals. The novel's opening lines highlight the particularly difficult economic conditions in which Rey lives as a child: "Aquel pedazo de azotea era el más puerco de todo el edificio. Cuando comenzó la crisis en 1990 ella perdió su trabajo de

limpiapisos" (9). The "she" here is Rey's mother, whose loss of income leaves the family living in wretched conditions. In a home without hope, *El Rey de la Habana* begins with the senseless, sudden deaths of Rey's complete biological family. Rey observes as in a matter of mere seconds his brother accidentally kills their mother in a fight; the brother commits suicide; and the grandmother has a fatal heart attack. The novel closes with Rey's murder of his lover Magda, which indirectly causes the fever that promptly kills Rey. In spite of the infinite flaws in their dysfunctional relationship, Rey and Magda for a certain time chose to live together and depend on each other for survival as best they can. Prior to their joint demise, the couple thus represents the best chance Rey might have for fathering a future generation in post-Soviet Havana, albeit in conditions of extreme deprivation and pornographic filth:

A ninguno le molestaba la suciedad del otro. Ella tenía un chocho un poco agrio y el culo apestoso a mierda. Él tenía una nata blanca y fétida entre la cabeza del rabo y el pellejo que la rodeaba. Ambos olían a grajo en las axilas, a ratas muertas en los pies, y sudaban. Todo eso los excitaba. (55)¹⁶

Rey and Magda live in horrid squalor, but at least they live together, relatively content for a time. Descriptions such as this one manifest the troublesome ambivalence in Gutiérrez's writing that, on one hand, critiques the social circumstances that marginalize poor Afro-Cubans like Rey and, on the other hand, markets exploitative images of life in Special Period Cuba to a paying international readership.

Overall, however, the way in which the conclusion of *El Rey de la Habana* closely mirrors its opening arraigns the cycle of poverty and violence that traps many black and mulatto men in post-Soviet Cuba. The present-day social marginalization suffered by Rey places him in a predetermined position to be perceived by others according to the stereotypical ideas of black masculinity as "savage" whether or not they accurately describe his character. In this sense Rey is the victim of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The novel denounces the social factors that lead to this racial stereotyping, even as Rey does commit brutally violent acts. No one except Rey knows how his family died in the beginning, and no one will ever know the circumstances of Rey and Magda's demise, no one except the reader. Rey's ultimate anonymity to the society in which he lives is perhaps the novel's greatest tragedy. And the sense of tragedy at the novel's close evidences an element of self-awareness in the narration itself that facilitates a critical reading, as opposed to a touristic one, of its stereotypical portrayals of Afro-Cuban masculinity.

Though Rey causes harmful violence, he and many Afro-Cuban men with him are also victims of a double standard attached to constructions of the masculinity of *pinguero*-like men whose virility is an asset when used for sexual-economic purposes but portrayed as a detriment to family life. Rey's last sexual partner besides Magda is an economically marginalized black woman named Ivón who relishes his sexual giftedness. Despite her sexual attraction to Rey and her praise for the way he satisfies her, Ivón responds negatively when Rey expresses his desire to live together and start a family: "Cuando yo pare es con un yuma, que tenga mucho billete, de lo contrario nada de preñadera ... ¡ni loca!" (191). For Ivón, a man such as Rey who has a similar socio-economic situation to her might be "King of Havana" in the bedroom but is a completely unsuitable partner for fathering her child. Ivón wishes only for a rich, foreign husband. Rey, the poor mulatto Cuban, can be a welcome sexual diversion, but he will not pass from being an object of pleasure to a desired partner so long as economic concerns guide Ivón's romantic decisions and so long as society perceives in black masculinity a threat of destructive violence.

If the hyper-virility of black men constituted an image of resistance to slavery in the nineteenth century, as Black argues, the same stereotypical characterization functions in the twenty-first century as an ambivalent reminder of perceptions of black masculinity as fundamentally different from (and inferior to) white masculinity. The implicit contrast to white masculinity may go unlabeled, though oftentimes post-Soviet Cuban cultural work projects white masculinity onto the figure of the foreign tourist, the "yuma" as he is called in *El Rey de la Habana*. When characterizations of black males in literature and the arts frame black masculinity in terms of violence and virility, they tie black men to one-dimensional stereotypes from which they may or may not escape over the course of a novel or a film. While the following observation by Greven is based on historical and literary analysis of slave masculinity in North America, it applies equally well not only to slaveholding Cuba but also, as I have shown, to contemporary constructions of black masculinity: "As many theorists have argued, the institution of slavery performed a twofold disfigurement of black male sexuality, by grotesquely, fetishistically emphasizing the sexual endowments and performance of black men while at the same time denying them the agency and authority of conventional manhood" (172). Estévez's *Los palacios distantes*, Gutiérrez's *El Rey de la Habana*, and other works portray in the context of Cuba's present this enduring "disfigurement" of black masculinity that was perpetrated by the institution of slavery. But they do so equivocally, often deferring to their readers and viewers whether these images are received with the critical

awareness needed to draw pro-egalitarian interpretations rather than to further perpetuate prejudicial stereotyping.

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NOTES

- 1 Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's earlier work *Trilogía sucia de la Habana* (1998), with a first-person narrator named Pedro Juan, contains a distinctly autobiographical strain, which Esther Whitfield examines in detail ("Autobiografía sucia"). Gutiérrez states, "...me di cuenta de que el 85%, quizás el 90%, de lo que está escrito en *Trilogía* es totalmente autobiográfico, crudamente y excesivamente autobiográfico. A veces pienso que me desnudé demasiado delante del público, hice un *strip-tease* demasiado prolongado" ("Centro Habana"). While the protagonist Rey of *El Rey de la Habana* bears resemblance to the Pedro Juan of *Trilogía sucia* as a hyper-sexual light-skinned mulatto, Rey cannot be said to be Gutiérrez's self-portrait in the sense of the photography of Harris and Peña. Gutiérrez insists, rather, that he based Rey on a young man he knows in his Centro Habana neighborhood ("Centro Habana").
- 2 Other cultural works in which I have identified similar presentations of stereotypes of black male bodies as eroticized and violently threatening include, to name a few, Fernando Pérez's film *La vida es silbar* (1998), Miguel Barnet's poem "Hijo de obrero" (1994), Alberto Pedro Torriente's play *Manteca* (1993), Ernesto Daranas's film *Los dioses rotos* (2008), and recent visual art by Elio Rodríguez and Douglas Pérez. All of these works arguably present prejudicial stereotypes to critical ends.
- 3 The slave character Francisco is the protagonist of Anselmo Suárez y Romero's 1839 novel *Francisco, el ingenio o las delicias del campo*, inspired by Juan Francisco Manzano's autobiography of the same year. Francisco reappears in the parodic novel *El negro Francisco* (1875) by Antonio Zambrana and in Sergio Giral's film *El otro Francisco* (1974).
- 4 A touristic viewpoint does not necessarily imply the sort of unthinking, self-centered perspective I attribute here to my hypothetically proposed "consuming touristic reader." Dean MacCannell's contribution to the first issue of the journal *Tourist Studies* contrasts the type of tourist gaze "installed by the institutions and practices of commercialized tourism" with another opposing tourist gaze that "is always aware that something is being concealed from it" (35-36). My hypothetical touristic reader represents just one of many possible tourist subjectivities.
- 5 De la Fuente documents three examples of measurable racial discrimination in post-Soviet Cuba: a growing income gap between blacks and whites, police

- repression and racial profiling, and under-representation in the media of non-white Cubans ("New Afro-Cuban" 710-11).
- 6 Esther Whitfield and Amalia Cabezas use *jinetero* preferentially. Jafari Allen, Araceli San Martín Moreno, and Peter Wade employ *pinguero* and *jinetero* in a manner consistent with their colloquial uses. Allen summarizes the difference between *jineteros* as "hustlers" of black market goods and services who may also have sex with foreigners, and *pingueros* as specifically sex workers (186-87).
 - 7 Special Period fiction often transgresses previously established governmental restrictions on freedom of artistic expression. Guillermina de Ferrari states, "Gutiérrez's aesthetics of 'the belly and sex' present a world of vulgarity and sheer necessity in which the animality of man is foregrounded" (26), arguing that the scatological aesthetics of dirty realism constitute sharp political critique amidst Special Period economic degradation. Vicky Unruh discusses the sudden permissiveness in Cuban art and literature as a post-Soviet "crisis of cultural authority" (732). In this context the pornographic language employed by Gutiérrez's novels can be seen as an exercise in relative freedom of expression after decades of repressive control.
 - 8 I am borrowing here from Peter Wade, who in his thorough review of recent scholarship insightfully distinguishes the concept of articulation from the concept of intersection when discussing methods of analysis for categories of identification including race, gender, and sexuality (19-27). Wade, in turn, evidently builds on Bhabha, who states, "The construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, demands an articulation of forms of difference – racial and sexual. Such an articulation becomes crucial if it is held that the body is always simultaneously (if conflictually) inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination, and power" (67).
 - 9 "Yuma" is a slang term originally used in Cuba to identify the United States but that now commonly references any white foreigner.
 - 10 Unlike the female victims of slave rape, the sexual abuse of male slaves has received little attention from historians and literary critics, one, because of the absence of offspring produced as evidence of the crime and, two, because gender norms made it even less likely that male slaves would report their abuse than females (Ellis 33).
 - 11 White patron of the arts Domingo del Monte commissioned both Juan Francisco Manzano's autobiography and Anselmo Suárez y Romero's novel *Francisco*, inspired by the former. Both texts were produced in 1839. Del Monte's literary direction of other writers gives him a share of authorship in the works such as these produced by members of his literary circle. In an "Advertencia" dated 1875 and reproduced in subsequent editions, Suárez y Romero describes the genesis of *Francisco* as "excitado por Domingo del

- Monte, a quien había pedido Mr. R. Madden algunas composiciones de escritores cubanos con objeto de saber el estado de la opinión acerca de la trata y de los esclavos entre los jóvenes pensadores de Cuba" (3). In addition to commissioning the novel, according to Suárez y Romero, Del Monte also gave Francisco its alternate title, *El ingenio o las delicias del campo*.
- 12 See, for example, José Felipe Carneado's 1962 article in *Cuba Socialista*, Fidel Castro's interview with Lee Lockwood in 1965 and his statement to the Third Congress of the Cuban Communist Party in 1986, and Pedro Serviat's 1986 book *El problema negro en Cuba y su solución definitiva*. De la Fuente contextualizes each of these party line assertions that the Revolution eliminated the problem of racial discrimination on the island (*Queloides* 12).
 - 13 Gott traces his explanation of the connotations of the term *mambí* to Fernando Ortiz's introduction to James O'Kelly's 1930 book *La Tierra del Mambí*, quoted in Antonio Elorza and Elena Hernández Sandoica's 1998 study *La Guerra de Cuba, 1895-1898* (73).
 - 14 Raymond Williams presents the concept of "the residual" as that which "has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present" (122). Williams distinguishes "the residual" from "the archaic" (122-23). The archaic was formed completely in the past and belongs solely to the past, though it might be perceived in the present. The residual, in contrast, belongs equally to the past and to the present.
 - 15 Biron's study does not include *El Rey de la Habana* or any other contemporary Cuban work.
 - 16 De Ferrari locates Gutiérrez's dirty realist aesthetics in the context of the Special Period economic crisis of the 1990s: "The crisis Cubans are undergoing does not allow for a refined aesthetics. On the contrary, it requires a project that helps to conceptualize the indignity of lived life in a vivid way. Hunger, shit, and sex function not only as indices of or metaphors for the generalized state of degradation under which people are forced to live, and some would like to ignore, but it also assumes a very literal meaning" (33).

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