

# **Objectification and Commodification of Blackness: The (Mis)Representation of Afro-Cuban women in Figurines and Dolls**

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The Caribbean island of Cuba is widely known for its beautiful beaches, cigars, and rum, and less known for the 7 UNESCO World Heritage Sites and 7 Biosphere Reserves, the latter with efforts to promote cultural tourism. The “heritage industry” has grown as a result of foreign and domestic investment in heritage projects such as the reconstruction of Habana Vieja (Old Havana) under UNESCO “patrimony of humanity” designation, and Cuba’s component of the transnational “Slave Routes” project (Knaver, 2011, p. 3). In the fall 2016, a Google search for tourist destinations in Cuba yield popular places such as Havana, Trinidad, Vinales, Varadero, Cienfuegos, Santiago de Cuba, Santa Clara, Holguin, Camaguey, Matanzas to Cayo Coco. Cuba has become a major tourist destination in the Caribbean attracting one million foreign travelers in 2016 and that number is projected to increase throughout the year (Latin Post, 2016). Cuban tourism authorities estimate that in 2016 some 3.7 million foreign tourists will visit the Caribbean nation, 175,200 more than in 2015, when the country broke the previous record by receiving 3.5 million travelers (Latin American Herald Tribune, 2016, para. 4). U.S tourists account for 147,401 of the tourism, followed by Germany France, Britain, and Italy and other non-traditional countries such as Mexico, Venezuela, and Argentina (Caribbean Business, 2016). In 2015, the industry produced a revenue of \$1.94 billion, a 10.7 percent boost from the previous year (The Latin Post, 2016).

The unprecedented rise in tourism is largely due to the restoration of diplomatic relations that has occurred between December 2014 with Raul Castro and Barack Obama's March 2016 trip to Cuba. Indeed, on Wednesday, August 31, 2016, the airline JetBlue became the first regularly scheduled flight from the U.S to Cuba in more than 50 years, signaling an important milestone toward normalizing relations between the two countries. Several other airlines will join JetBlue, including Southwest Airlines, Alaska Airlines, American Airlines, Frontier Airlines, Spirit Airlines and the United Airlines would operate flights to Havana (Robles, 2016). Tourism to Cuba is not a recent phenomenon nor a new tourism market, given Cuba's long history as a travel destination prior to the 1959 Revolution and non-American visitors thereafter. Despite the six-decade long U.S blockade, tourism in Cuba is the third largest source of foreign exchange after sugar and tobacco industry, tourism accounts for about 10% of GDP (Cuba Journal, 2016; Mordor Intelligence, 2016).

One of the most recognizable stereotypical images of Cuban tourism for decades and still today is the sexualized and 'exotic' Afro-Cuban, "both officially, as sanctioned by the Cuban government, and unofficially, as practiced jointly by *jineteras* (female sex workers) and sex tourist" (Roland, 2010, p. 6). This imagery is rooted in the tourism of the 1920s and 1950s in which magazines and guidebooks presented Cuba as a place of "unconstrained relaxation and sin" (Roland, 2010, p. 6). Similarly, one can find a plethora of "racialized caricatures of black Cubans for sale" in small and large markets in Cuba that adopt racially ascribed stereotypes such as enlarged lips, big hips, and big toothy smiles (Perry, 2016, p.43).

## **WITNESSING AND TESTIMONY**

The following analysis contributes to discussions on the commodification of culture by examining the commercial marketing and packaging of folklorized blackness in Cuba tourism. I assert that folkloric packagings of female figurines must be understood as gendered, sexualized, and racialized, promoting (mis)representations of racialized stereotypes of Afro-Cuban blackness. This analysis is informed by my short educational trip to Cuba from May 22 through May 31 as part of the Faculty Development in International Business (FDIB) sponsored by the Center for International Business and Education and Research (CIBER) at the University of Maryland. My sociological curiosity for participating in this program was to gain a greater understanding of the Cuban economy, the changes taking place domestically and internationally, in particular with an interest in US-Cuba relationships with an intersectional framework. In this paper I draw from observations, conversations, and interactions with local Cubans, and faculty from the *Centro de Estudios Hemisfericos Sobre Estados Unidos* (CESHEU).

My experience and first account of bearing witness to the commodification of culture in Cuba is timely and appropriate to the this year's journal theme *Witnessing and Testimony: Hurt, Healing, and Herstories*. The method of *testimonio* is a way to create knowledge and theory through personal experiences, it's theorizing about realities as Women of Color (Latina Feminist Group 2001). Bernal, Bruciaga, and Carmona (2012) in a well known article titled *Chicana/Latina Testimonios: Mapping the Methodological, Pedagogical, and Political* write that the process of "testimoniar (to give testimony) is the act of recovering papelitos guardados—previous experiences otherwise silenced or untold—and unfolding them into a narrative that conveys personal, political, and social realities. One's testimonio reveals an epistemology of truths and how one has come to understand them" (p. 364). Within this framework, I "break the silences" as Dr. Ekuia Omosupe noted at the Women of Color writing workshop in September 2016 by challenging the hegemonic discourse, deconstructing, decolonizing, and disrupting the normalization of Afro-Cuban figurines as inoffensive and innocuous pieces of ceramic art.

While I was in Cuba I observed a plethora of objects "representing" Afro-Cubans and Black culture—principally dolls and figurines found in tourists sites and souvenir markets in Old Havana and throughout Cuba. The circulation and consumption of these objects in the Cuban tourist industry is examined, allowing the reader to have a better understanding of how race, gender, and sexuality and the commodification of culture have been shaped Cuban national identity. In this paper I examine two of the common figures, the dark-skinned female figurine and cloth doll who look like the U.S counterpart jezebel and mammy.

In what follows, I use an intersectional analysis to examine the role of *mestizaje* and *Cubanidad* in creating a Cuban national identity and shaping nationhood and Cuban tourism. I then examine the racialized and sexualized Afro-Cuban women in figurines as a form of folklorized blackness.

### ***Mestizaje and Cubanidad***

Roland (2010, p. 4) observes that "questions of local identity and representation, known as *Cubanidad* in the Cuban context are central to attracting tourists to a place," Since its independence, Cuba has dealt with questions of national identity and cultural representation. Cuba like other Latin American countries drew from its long history of racial mixing, known as *mestizaje*, with the mixture of African and European ancestry. José Martí, one of the leading Cuban national heroes from the War of Independence against Spain is credited as the originator of Cuba's racial ideology and racial democracy that "*el color no importa*," that color doesn't matter (Ferrer, 1999, Roland, 2006, p. 153). The leading voice embracing this call was anthropologist Fernando Ortiz who characterized Cuba as an *ajjaco*, a stew composed of

diverse vegetables (races) each with its own unique flavor adding to the whole (Ortiz, 1947 [1970]; Kaifa Roland, professor of anthropology at the University of Colorado Boulder comments that while Cubans proclaimed *mestizaje*, “Americans who toured pre-revolutionary Cuba saw spicy blackness. Where Cubans celebrated the mixed race *mulata* as a symbol of the nation’s advancement from rural to urban, black to white, foreigners recognized only her sexual Otherness” (2010, p. 4). Even though Cuba is no longer personified through sexualized female metaphors, there continues to be the sexual commodification of Afro-Cuban women through figurines and dolls that are available to foreign tourists for consumption. It is within this context that I examine the racial stereotypes of Afro-Cuban figurines and dolls that are part of contemporary international tourism in Cuba.

### ***Nationalism and Tourism: Intersections of gender, race, and sex***

A number of scholars have written extensively on the implications of war, nationalism, and tourism for women (Enloe, 1989; Fanon, 1967; Gregory, 2003) where “colonized women have served as sex objects for foreign men” (Enloe, 1989, p. 44) and “symbolized a battleground in the conquest of foreign Others” (Roland, 2010, p. 12). Kaifa Roland explains that “newly independent underdeveloped nations are led to choose tourism as a source of income, exoticizing stereotypes have been well entrenched in the tourist’s’ imagination” (2010, p. 13). Mimi Sheller (2003) argues that ‘sex tourism packages Caribbean people as “embodied commodities” by turning the long history of sexual exploitation of women (and men) under colonial rule into a “lived colonial fantasy” available for the mass tourist consumer’ (cited in Roland, 2010, p. 13). Clancy (2002) notes that European magazines and tour operators have long exploited such imagery by promoting Cuba as a travel destination for sex tourism. Ronald (2010) notes that Black women are seen in Cuba’s lower social and class strata, and continue today to be susceptible to sexualized commodification.

Fidel Castro and now his successor, Raul Castro note that racism had been solved as many of the blatant discriminatory practices that existed in pre-Revolutionary Cuba no longer exist. This includes ending segregation at beach clubs, schools, and in neighborhoods (Cave, 2016). Esteban Morales one of Cuba’s leading academics and public intellectuals has written extensively on Cuba’s failure to confront and address the impact of racism in Cuban society. Morales locates racist discrimination in the evolution of Cuban culture and concepts of nationality. He comments that in the 2nd Havana Declaration of 1962, Castro remarked that the race issue had been resolved, which resulted in the long ‘years of silence’ (2013, p. 118). Kaifa Roland points out that “race tends to be written out of analyses of Cuba’s past and present

politico-economic processes due to the pre-revolutionary policy of “whitening”<sup>1</sup> and the revolutionary position that removing class exploitation would also eradicate racial discrimination” (2006, p. 152). Furthermore, Perry (2016) writes that race was juxtaposed to nation, and

“racial forms of identification were ultimately rendered counterrevolutionary if not counternational. Black Cubans thus concerned with the persistence of racial inequalities

found themselves in a dilemma. If they chose to organize around racially associated grievances, they risked being labeled counterrevolutionary; if they did not, they chanced complacency in their own subjugation. Such silencings were institutionalized by state bannings of black social organizations including *sociedades de color*, along with reported suppression of Afro-Cuban religious communities and organizations” (p. 11)

The official discourse following the revolution marked historically Black organizations “anachronism and unnecessary, and at worst, divisive and racist” (Knauer, 2011, p. 13). Cuban narratives thus downplay the racialized history of the nation and instead promoted an inclusive, post-racial nationalism (Knauer, 2011). The restoration of diplomatic relations that has occurred between December 2014 with Raul Castro and Barack Obama’s March 2016 trip reveal that Cuba anti-racism narrative is far from the truth. In an interview for the *New York Times*, Yusimí Rodríguez López, an Afro-Cuban independent journalist commented that there have been job listings “where they say they only want whites” in which Cuban officials have little interest in discussing or listening to the issue. As she said “If you silence the idea that there’s racism you silence every conversation about the problem” (Cave, 2016, para. 23). Manuel Valier Figueroa, who is a fifty year old actor said “if there’s a dance competition, they’re going to choose the woman who is fair-skinned with light, good hair. If there’s a tourism job, the same.” He added: “Why are there no blacks managing hotels? You don’t see any blacks working as chefs in hotels, but you see them as janitors and porters. They get the inferior jobs” (Cave, 2016, para. 26-27). The reality is that still today, blackness and skin color are important in Cuba and increasingly so in the age of international tourism and remittances (Jiménez, forthcoming).

### **The Role of the Cuban State in the Packaging of Folklorized Blackness**

Lisa Maya Knauer, Anthropology professor at UMass Dartmouth, comments that in the 1990s, small enterprises, hotels, resorts, and hard-currency stores

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<sup>1</sup> Whitening known as *blanqueamiento* in Spanish is very much the practice in many Latin American countries to erase evidence of African ancestry in their populations.

began to mushroom at the same time Black-identified culture has “become increasingly commoditized and packaged for touristic consumption” (2011, p. 5). During this time exoticized and “African” style “carvings also began to appear in Cuba’s tourist zones and other national icons such as hand-rolled cigars, bottles of rum, and Che Guevara images reproduced in a number of products. Still, blackness has become a desirable commodity in the tourist economy, particularly, cultural practices marked as “Black” – folkloric music, dance and “religions of African origin.” (Knauer, 2011, p. 5). The overwhelming research by both U.S and Cuban scholars point to the government’s efforts to package Cuban culture for touristic consumption, making it more commercial due to the economic crisis of the early 1990s that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union (Knauer, 2011). The Cuban state has played a central role in the commercial marketing and packaging of folklorized blackness, which have generated a tourist-related income (Perry, 2016). These include the promotion of Ocha-Lucumí and other Afro-Cuban religious systems as well as some *santero* and *santeras* (santeria priests and priestesses) that have been able to register their homes as State-recognized cultural centers (Knauer, 2011; Hagedorn, 2001; Moore, 1989; Martínez Furé, 2000; Perry, 2016). A notable example is Havana’s *Museo de los Orishas*, that is housed in the headquarters of the state-sanctioned *Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba*. In the *Museo de los Orishas*, tourists for a fee of \$10 CUC (roughly half an average Cuban’s monthly salary) can view religiously adorned, life-size figures of various orishas of the Ocha-Lucumí pantheon (Perry, 2016). Paying customers can also go on excursions to designated Ocha houses and participate in rites of initiation into the Lucumí religion (Hagedorn, 2001). This can be seen as efforts to “governmentalize and contain Afro-Cuban religion and Black public culture through preservation and re-enactment” (Knauer, 2011, p. 3). These state run religious practices are also seen as religious commerce and refereed as practices of “pseudo-folklore,” according to Rogelio Martínez Furé, a prominent Afro-Cuban intellectual and member of the *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional* (Martínez Furé, 2000, p.159). This pseudo-folklore is also largely seen in female figurines made of clay that I saw in markets in Old Havana, restaurants, and other souvenir shops throughout Cuba (see image 1 and 2).

It is within the aforementioned context that my analysis centers with the omnipresent figure of a black female figurine that is depicted in bright colors, ample hips, exaggerated breasts, bottoms, and bulging lips.<sup>2</sup> This sexualized caricature image is problematic because it racializes Afro-Cuban women as Other and objectifies them. Moreover, the contexts in which they are created and disseminated is worthy of consideration. Knauer (2011) observes that all of the venues where these icons are sold are either licensed or run by State

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<sup>2</sup> These figurines are not unique to Cuba as they are also found in the U.S and Latin America and Caribbean such as the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Colombia, to name a few (Cf. Lott 1993; Perry, 2016; Rivero 2005).

enterprises. For example, vendors whether in stores or in stands must be licensed by the Office of the City Historian (OHCH).

Image 1: Afro-Cuban female clay figurine



Image 2: Tall and short Afro-Cuban female clay figurines



Many online shops refer to these as “traditional Cuban lady statues,” “clay handmade statuette of a Cuban woman,” “Souvenir dolls,” “ceramic figurines,” “cuban street market dolls.” When I informally asked vendors what these

figurines were, the overwhelming majority said that it was a representation of Cuban females. My informal findings corroborate that of Marc C. Perry (2016) who did research on the rise of Cuban hip hop following the island's post-Soviet-era of the early 1990s. Market vendors told him that the figures "physical attributes and sexual explicitness" were "simply drawn from Cuban folklore" and one vendor even "claimed that these figures and their grossly exaggerated body parts actually resemble black Cuban themselves" (2016, p. 44). Similarly, some vendors and artisans seemed genuinely proud of the items, and "thought them beautiful and important representations of authentic Cubaness with no trace of irony" (Knauer, 2011 p. 11)<sup>3</sup>. In *Cuban Color in Tourism and La Lucha: An Ethnography of Racial Meanings*, L. Kaifa Roland offers a look at the lasting effects of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of state-sponsored segregated tourism in Cuba. She observes that 'Blackness and Black identifying features are denigrated in comparison to whiteness or features identified as "whitened"' (2006, p. 153). I contend that the epitome of this is exemplified in the figurines and dolls sold in souvenir stores throughout Cuba that (mis)represent Afro-Cuban women as sexual objects and ascribe gendered, and racial stereotypes that draw on the notion of "black primal hypersexuality" (Perry, 2016, p. 44). These commodified representations are for sale in nearly every souvenir shop that are "commercial and geared toward tourists, but also at gift shops in ostensibly more high-minded museums" (Knauer, 2011, p. 8). Afro-Cuban figurines are more than a commodity, they are fetishised. As Roland (2010, p. 5) writes:

in today's Cuba, tourists can buy everything from figurines of Fidel Castro to the sexual services of young women and men, so long as payment is in a convertible (that is, foreign) currency. Cubanidad is being bought and sold in Cuba's emerging free market

The racialized, gendered, and sexualized female figurines correlate to the North American Black female figurines that portray them as sexual, seductive with colorful head-wraps invoking the socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood (Collins, 1991). In the U.S, African women figurines were often placed in magazines and on souvenir items such as planters, drinking glasses, figurines, ashtrays, to novelty items (The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, 2016). U.S feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* writes that during slavery, the dominant ideology fostered the creation of four negative images of Black women: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare mother, and the jezebel.<sup>4</sup> The controlling image of the jezebel correlate to the

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<sup>3</sup> This was an African American scholar who related this information to Knauer at the Association for Study of the World African Diaspora (ASWAP) Conference

<sup>4</sup> The mammy is the "good mother," the faithful, obedient domestic servant that was created to justify the economic exploitation of female slaves. The matriarch symbolizes the "bad" mother



Afro-Cuban female figurines as well as the mammy. Perry (2016, p. 44) writes that “these figurines index a raced economy of erotic desire; their absurdly large breasts (sometimes with protruding nipples) and correspondingly ample backside command a sexualized gaze.” Lane (2005) observes that this enduring representation of Afro-Cuban women and mulatta women as oversexed were formative in the early shaping of Cuba’s national imagery.

The material object of the Afro-Cuban female figurine of clay is depicted as exotic, while the *muñeca de trapo cubano* (cuban cloth doll) is portrayed as physically unattractive. I now turn to the analysis of the *muñeca de trapo cubano* that invokes the “Mammy” also known as “Aunt Jemima” in the U.S context.

Image 3: Muñeca de trapo cubano



The black female doll is somewhat of a heavy build, it comes in a variety of sizes, it's made of black cloth and is dressed in colonial-era clothes, often covered with an apron and has a wide smile. The doll has matching headscarves, ribbon bows, and long hoop earrings. Knauer (2011) writes that dark-skinned woman wearing a head wrap was a popular image in nineteenth century marquillas in colonial Cuba. The figurine of the female doll is also part of the commodification of culture and blackness in a Cuban economy that (mis)represents, racializes, objectifies Afro-Cuban women. Berry (2016) writes that Afro-Cuban female figurines and dolls function as a controlling images “to naturalize or justify the inability of Afro-Cubans to embody true respectability,

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figure in Black women's homes, who can't supervise their children, is overly aggressive, unfeminine women. The welfare mother is the third controlling image, it's tied to Black women's stereotype of taking advantage of the welfare state. Lastly, the jezebel is seen as a whore, a sexually aggressive woman (Collins, 1991)

which is defined through hardworking (deserving), atheist (modern) civilized subjectivity (Whiteness)" (, p.32). This, I assert, must be understood within the context of the commodification of culture in Cuba where what is marked as "Black" and "authentic" cultural representations of *Cubanidad* is packaged and sold to tourists literally and figuratively. As Marc D. Perry comments, "the tourism industry has enabled a commodification and vending of Afro-Cuban cultural forms for consumption by foreign tourists and the Cuban state alike" (2016, p.13).

## Conclusion

In line with the theme for this journal *Witnessing and Testimony: Hurt, Healing, and Herstories*, what I sought to do in this paper was to examine Afro-Cuban figurines and dolls found in tourists sites and souvenir markets in Old Havana and throughout Cuba while on an education trip in May 2016. Witnessing first-hand the commodification of culture and reading about it has facilitated a greater understanding of how cultural productions of folklorized blackness have been shaped by Cuban national identity since its independence and the special period following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. I maintain that folkloric packagings of female figurines must be understood as gendered, sexualized, and racialized, promoting (mis)representations of racialized stereotypes of Afro-Cuban blackness. The Afro-Cuban female figurines and dolls found in tourist souvenirs markets reinforce deeply embedded racialized and gendered images.

Can the commodification of black Cuban women as sexual objects and the consumer culture of figures and dolls be interpreted as benevolent or somehow beneficial to local Cubans? Roland (2010) makes a helpful intervention by noting that Cubans have found a niche in the economy to exercise agency through different strategies as they navigate their way through the rules of revolutionary society, amid the racialized commodification and marketing and packaging of folklorized blackness. For example, the artisans and vendors are able to parlay their expertise (real or ascribed) in Black culture into a means of supporting themselves and their families. Although this is at the expense of feticizing and racially stereotyping Afro-Cuban women, Afro-Cuban figurines and dolls in circulation today are not all are purchased by tourists, notes Lisa Maya Knauer, professor of Anthropology. Although I did not personally have the opportunity to visit homes of Cuban colleagues, Knauer (2011) asserts that in the homes of Cuban friends she visited, she saw the dolls as decorative items, "placed on crocheted doilies on a sofa or shelf, but often they were part of an altar for one of the African-origin religions." She further adds that

"in these contexts, a doll may personify a person's spirit guide in espiritismo (spiritism), one of the orishas in la regla de ocha or santería (the deities

Yemayá and Oyá are both represented as dark-skinned Black women), or a similarly powerful female figure in Palo Monte. The dolls serve as entry points for the divine healing energies of these religious practices, and are thus sacred items" (p.10).

I do not have enough scholarly evidence to make the claim that few Cubans, including Black Cubans are troubled by the racial, gendered, and sexualized figurines and dolls. What I have found through my academic readings and informal conversations in Cuba is that these caricature images are cultural productions ascribed and legitimized by the Cuban state that become normalized and naturalized for the tourist market. As Roland (2010, p. 6) puts it:

Though tourists may fetishize culture in its commodified forms, the hosts are not

necessarily mystified by the performance of their culture in the same way. Rather, they

are active strategists, improvising in the tourism game designed by the Cuban state with

the desires of the tourists in mind

I believe there is hope in expanding the discourse of the racialized, gendered, sexualized, commodification of blackness in Cuba with the New Afro-Cuban movement that has taken shape during this time of economic transition. The New Afro-Cuban movement is a social network consisting of hip hop artists, visual artists, writers, academics, and activists who share common grievances about racism and its social effects. Since the 1990s, they have been pushing the discussion of race into the public arena (de la Fuente, 2008; Berry 2016, p. 34) as can be seen with the recent work of Marc D. Perry in *Negro Soy Yo: Hip Hop and Raced Citizenship in Neoliberal Cuba*. Only time will tell if the trope of Cuban folklore marked as "black culture" such as the figurines and dolls will remain in tourism-related commerce.

Future research points to interviews with vendors and creators as well as tourists that buy souvenirs such as figurines and dolls. It would be interesting to know the artifacts production process, (i.e. the decisions on how to make these figurines from design and styles, price, etc). This would help us understand the intricacies and perhaps complex intertwining of a tourist economy that relies on the circulation of cultural production of *Cubanidad*. Furthermore, a comparative study can be considered looking at other Caribbean islands and Latin American countries that have similar figurines and dolls.

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