

The Contrasexual Cuban

Rey L.



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This mixed media installation is an analysis of my distinctiveness, a contemplation of my past and a vision for my future. This photograph encapsulates my journey between the seemingly paradoxical identities of a feminine Cuban man.

As a young boy, I fought both of these identities. My parents taught me to deny my own femininity and immigrating to America inoculated me with a resentment towards my Cuban upbringing. I soon built a façade constructed with denial and cemented with heteronormativity. I tried to become a cisgendered man detached from his culture and entrenched in my new environment. After some time, I began hating the disgusting veneer with which I had lived my life. I couldn't bear the amount of thinking that went into playing the character of my antithesis. Slowly, I began to chip away at that false identity. I am still trying to unlearn many of the ignorant lessons I was taught, and undoing the self-hatred that I embodied.

On one hand this artwork shows my transition as I start to reconcile my connection to my Cuban heritage; on the other, it exhibits my affinity for the feminine and how these two can coalesce. I am shown in a dress made out of tobacco leaves. Tobacco being one of Cuba's most revered commodities, it adorns the body of Cuba's least exalted export. This tension provides the catalyst to forge a bridge to a culture I once rejected and cultivate acceptance towards a once repressed self.

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¹ In my usage of the word contrasexual, I am referencing its roots in the Jungian theory of anthropomorphic archetypes, where it is defined as “*Of a portion of a person's psyche... that has characteristics of the opposite gender.*”

Preface:

The following is a collection of reflections that I had in accordance with the two identities which I explored throughout this project. A feminine and Latinx man. These seemingly mutually exclusive identities have contrasted each other throughout my life and caused much confusion and dread. In this essay I delved deep into my experiences as both, in order to establish an honest foundation for my journey. While at a time I rejected both of these identities, I now accept the reality of who I am and by doing this writing, I am also trying to reconnect with what that means. While I face an upward battle of decolonization and unlearning self-hatred, I am beginning to take my first steps into the new Rey. A Rey full of acceptance and understanding, characterized by a passion to break down the systems that caused me to hate these parts of myself for so long. These are my experiences and my struggles. This is not an instruction manual for people faced with the same situation, but rather a recounting of my winding path in dealing with the aforementioned topics. I have deliberately written some of my regrettable moments in order to acknowledge the hurt they caused and have a genuine discussion around how to improve from them. I hope as you read, you consider my thought process at the time and reflect upon the way these systems have affected your perceptions of yourself and others.

Feminine

Like every other child, I thought my conceptions and ideas were the norm. My heart sunk when I discovered that I was different, and that my difference was not applauded, but rebuked. My affinity for the feminine meant that I was not the macho man my family had always wanted and they found that unacceptable. I was beat for every effeminate turn of my wrist, every sway of the hip, every time I danced with my friends: a slap, a scream, a clenched fist, a cry, and maybe an apology. I was micromanaged, the slightest detail scrutinized for not fitting their ideal male kin. I didn't understand how I should act. Everything I did felt natural to me. To conform was to mutilate the person I was, to cram myself into the idea of what my parents wanted as their son.

The change was difficult, but soon I became a wall of denial; cemented in heteronormativity. A regrettable phase of my life ensued, a result of the omnipresent hostility I encountered from my parents, friends, or society in general. This charade began crystallizing into my identity. I looked at myself with disdain, hating the fraud I had become. Living "inside the closet" does little to describe the actuality of the situation. My head filled with misconceptions of masculinity and I became the worst straight man imaginable. I overcompensated with misogynistic, hyper-masculine and aggressive behavior. I shamed other people for doing what I yearned to do. I missed the feeling of high-heels, the taste of lipgloss, the freedom I felt when lacing myself into a corset. I knew I couldn't keep this up; the pressure I felt, the people I hurt, the amount of thinking that went into playing the character of my antithesis was breaking me inside and out. I started to fracture.

Cuban

I've never been much of a "Cuban", whether you define a Cuban person through rough generalizations or by the actual customs practiced in Cuba, that definition has always left me out of its scope. In saying this, I may have lied, as I really have given so little attention to my heritage that I could not tell you what either of those definitions entail.

I was born and raised in Holguin, a small eastern city of the island. My existence and day to day activities seemed perfectly fine; my grandmother having to barter for food, my long walks to and from my school, the scolding I received after talking about eating beef to my friends, all seemed normal parts of a confusing reality. Little did I know that all of these quirks had a dark underbelly that my parents tried to hide throughout my time in Cuba. Those innocent rose-tinted lenses through which I saw my childhood were shattered as I entered the U.S at age 6. When I heard we were leaving, I thought that America was going to be our oasis, a shining beacon of modernity and luxury. I remember specifically dreaming the day before I left to Miami of the streets paved in gold, accompanied by dazzling golden streetlights, as I soon found out, the truth, was much uglier. America was a beacon for modernity and luxury but only for a limited few, and an immigrant status did not help.

Hours spent in immigration offices and behind my mother's cash register at the local supermarket helped me realize that the fruits of this nation were harder to attain than I had once thought. My nationalistic mirage faded, I began to see this nation for what it was. I soon realized that my parents were never going to be able to reach their fullest potential since they had immigrated too late, and had to pay for bills from the time we landed on the tarmac.

Feminine

My disgusting veneer started chipping off slowly, and my real self made its way through the cracks, as a wondrous transformation began to occur. I soon learned that my worth as a human being was not determined by my parents or society's approval.

I began to understand that the masculine orthodox was a product of the degradation of women and idealization of man, that these genders could be expanded upon and that their potential for expression was not as black & white as I once thought. I began to understand how these system of oppression had tricked me into being a perpetrator for those same systems, the worst type of victim. I finally begun to understand that my lack of fear to be feminine was not a stepping down for me, and that the mindset behind that was rooted in our culture's deep-seated misogyny. These inalienable facts made it clear to me that my feminine energy was not something to be shamed, nor was it something to celebrate, rather it is what should be accepted as the norm. My predilection for the feminine should not be exploited, I am not your novelty or your token. I am a person whose identity encompasses more than my status as your potential Gay Best Friend, nor your Hispanic friend that makes your racists statements not so.

These kinds of revelations changed my life, and although I had ideologically affirmed my identities, the actions I took fell short of my expectations. I continued hiding my heels and dresses from my parents and never dared to walk out the door without wearing my mask of masculinity for fear of misinterpretation, rejection, and harassment . I knew that the outside world assumed ignorant ideas.

Cuban

They were too suffocated by the financial burden of starting and maintaining an American household to ever give mind to going to medical school or even college for that matter. They made me their only priority, putting all the pressure for success on my shoulders. A feeling started to fester inside me, one fueled by the inexplicable misery that my family experienced and continued to experience and the normalization of my pain and there's, resentment. I saw the vast change in quality of life in both countries, and even though my life in Miami wasn't the American dream, it had a lot more variety and options than my life in Cuba. I felt as though my rightful life had been robbed from me just by being born in the wrong country.

I didn't hate the U.S. for being so bountiful, I hated my home for being so poor, my family for being successful in a place where it didn't matter, my parents for taking me out of my innocence and showing me the cruelties of the world. My mindset was short-sighted and misinformed. After rejecting my Cuban blood out of resentment, I ran into an even bigger problem. Assimilation. I immigrated young enough to learn the language and culture perfectly but old enough to never forget the tribulations I suffered on that island. In nine months I learned basic english vocabulary and in a year I was fluent in conversation. I started being taught American values and customs simultaneously as my brain threw out any information relevant to my background. I was an American. My Cuban heritage had crystallized into the backseat, never again to be discussed or acknowledged. My education encouraged it.

Feminine

Even in communities with misunderstood identities, I also faced rejection. The reaction I received from some members of the LGBTQ community was appalling. What I thought would be a holistic welcoming turned into an attack on my femininity. Everything that I felt was natural about me became vilified and unwanted again. Even my boyfriend at the time threatened to leave me over the fact that I wore heels. This unfortunate event, along with others, hindered my courage to commit to being openly feminine. Still, I never lost interest in what I loved and coming to this school changed so much for me. For the first time, I publicly exhibited my rejection of gender norms, and was welcomed by a community who did not criticize me for my clothing preference. Instead, I met some other people who did the same. In the last few months, I have become aware of the fluidity of my gender expression, and it has been an incredibly liberating time. Even though I am still trying to unlearn a lot of detrimental lessons from my past, I hope in writing this, I can help chip away the final piece of that old Rey.

Cuban

As I flowed around chapters filled with information of a state that I had only lived in for a couple of months and began celebrating holidays that seemed alien, I slowly began to feel that this was now my culture. My school taught me that the correct way to become a part of society was to assimilate into the greater majority. In some ways these values shaped the way I saw society, but I was too young in Cuba to form full theories of social stratification. I began to see myself as my family's only hope, and with the helpful guise of protestant capitalism all around me, I was indoctrinated into the school of thought that I could alter my future through hard work and talent, if I so wished. This ideological double-edged sword became my rallying cry throughout my years of work in academia. Recently, I have realized what I fell prey to. This writing is witness to that.