

CELEBRATED, DISPOSSESSED AND WORSHIPPED. REPRESENTATIONS OF THE TRAGIC DESTINY OF THE HERO IN CONTEMPORARY CARIBBEAN VISUAL IMAGINARY

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Abstract || The present paper focuses on analysing the images of violence through the representation of heroes associated to combat contexts. Specifically, we will examine those cases in which that hero, despite its champion condition, appears defeated, overcome by the context. The reflections of artists such as Marcos Lora Read (Dominican Republic), Javier Castro (Cuba) and Ebony Patterson (Jamaica), by using various artistic mediums, have used the image of the hero to deconstruct elements of their societies, offering a discourse able to produce subversive values from the heroic tragedy.

Keywords || The Caribbean | Javier Castro | Contemporary Art | Hero | Marcos Lora Read | Ebony Patterson | Violence

0. Introduction

The history of the Caribbean, as it is, appears closely related to violence. To physical violence, marked by the disappearance of the indigenous element and the transferring of large masses of African populations through slavery, but also by what Walter Mignolo denominates as epistemic violence (Mignolo, 2007), which can be understood as a simultaneous movement of creation of a centre and establishment of outskirts, within a geographic runout that repositioned the human being in the world. Such violence, which begins with the Discovery of America, will set the region's History, and will develop a speech marked by gaps and omissions. These gaps will be as important, if not more, as documents, data compiled in the files. They will constitute another archive, which means the impossibility of reconstructing a perfect genealogy, a continuous History, something that the Nobel Prize winner, Derek Walcott, will state in a graphic manner pointing out “[t]he sigh of History rises over ruins not over landscapes, and in the Antilles there are few ruins to sigh over” (Walcott, 1995: 30).

Such fragmentation of the historic speech, permeated by reflected elements —Paul Gilroy goes beyond, defining the Atlantic as a continent in negative, inhabited by a culture resulting from the tricontinental traffic between Europe, Africa, and America (Gilroy, 1993)— and by the subalternity of the African and indigenous substrate with regard to the dominant Eurocentric cultural basis, will generate a process of identitarian search which remains until our days. If we approach the Caribbean thought, many theoreticians from different perspectives propose such gap as the foundation on which the Caribbean culture arises. If the *Black Atlantic* thought finds in the Atlantic a shared territory dominated by travels and the trauma of slavery (Gilroy, 1993), for Antonio Benítez Rojo, who follows a passage in the novel by Fanny Buitrago set in a symbolically peripheral space within the periphery which makes up the Caribbean within the American continent, the existence of this hollow which takes the form of an abandonment of sand and water, of the embodiment of an uncertain memory, of the impossibility of completion which finally turns into the impossibility of essential definition —“nosotros renunciamos al Ser”, says Glissant (2010: 26)— covering the whole History of the region:

Todo caribeño, al final de cualquier intento de llegar a los orígenes de su cultura, se verá en una playa desierta, solo y desnudo, emergiendo del agua salada como un náufrago tembloroso —*The Spanish Man*— sin otro documento de identidad que la memoria incierta y turbulenta, inscrita en las cicatrices, en los tatuajes, en el color mismo de su piel. En última instancia, todo caribeño es un exiliado de su propio mito y de su propia historia, también de su propia cultura y de su propio ser. De su propio ser y estar en el mundo. Es, simplemente, un pañamán (Benítez

Rojo, 1998: 258).

Personal and social introspection will manifest itself in this context, as a celebration of the creativity that results from the need for generating new points of reference out of encounter, as a reinstatement of that which was lost on the road, as a search for roots (Kobena Mercer speaks about a “genealogía en acción” (Mercer, 2010: 37) or, finally, as an utopia under construction. Also, it shouldn’t be forgotten that the Caribbean is the territory of imagination, which necessarily it’s going to be a cartographic imagination and, as a consequence of this, from the first moment it is displacement. Columbus already imagined the world as a result of the dislocation which took him on the Caribbean; a path followed by the realignment of the world and the increasing narrowing of the connections between the territories which compound it, an element at the base of the wallersteinian world-systems (Wallerstein, 1979).

Such imagination is conceived as well as a weapon used by the cultures that Antonio Gatzambide, following Gérard Pierre-Charles, has denominated “culturas de resistencia” (Gatzambide, 1998: 34). On her part, Tanya Barson talks about “la estrategia de la representación de narrativas históricas (al no existir archivos adecuados) a base de una recuperación imaginativa” (Barson, 2010: 12). Creativity rises, in that context, as the need for generating alternative speeches, facing the loss of history, but also as a search for a greater representation and autodefinition, intervention in the social environment —Rita de Maeseneer, following Chamoiseau, presents the Caribbean creator like “guerrero de lo imaginario” (Maeseneer De, 2004: 17). Nowadays, the dynamic between local and global and the appearance of new systems of domination have generated alternative models of resistance. The Caribbean societies —not independent all of them, it musn’t be forgotten — are faced with the consequences of a ferocious capitalism and the environmental degradation, with the attraction and affirmation of the centres of power. Violence in such a framework ceases to be merely symbolic to come to fruition in a very visible manner. The consequences of the collision between the peripheral situation of the Caribbean and its closeness to those hegemonic centres bring about tension which results in situations of marginalization and conflicts about inclusion and representation in national imaginaries.

Many artists have reflected about the current violence within this framework, connecting it with the contradictions of the Caribbean historical process. It is in such context where the figure of the hero emerges, as a tragic character whose final failure is the result of the impossibility to entirely achieve the aspirations of the Caribbean communities, because of the limitations imposed by the peripheral place of the region since the moment of its “Discovery”. In addition,

the recreation of the hero comes linked to the need for redefining the connection between the chosen individual and the whole community, which he is supposed to represent. In other words, to negotiate the borrowings and to establish hypothetical frontiers between elite culture and popular culture. The defeat of the hero becomes in this cases a possibility used by the artist to subvert systems of cultural domination in an ambivalent way, and at the same time as a tool for setting a position from which creators can dialogue in a more egalitarian manner with the arts mainstream. The strategies of appropriation and irony appear, thus, as new weapons in the artist's hands, when recovering fragments from a past interpreted in an univocal way, in which the logic of the event is defused, subsumed by a superior speech —nationalism, integration, regional integration, fight against colonialism, etc.— and reduced to a direct significance.

Which place belongs to the hero in the Caribbean artistic imaginary? Which models of resistance does such figure embody? ¿How is the heroic conceived linked to the Caribbean reality? In closing, ¿how to connect the historical figure with the creative context of the current art? The present article approaches through a surrounding —it couldn't have been in another way— the representations of the hero in current Caribbean art. This work aims to analyse the forms of representation that rule the apparition of certain value systems other than the official power, linked to urban movements on the insular Caribbean. These systems are linked to the figure of the hero, not anymore a historical figure but an embodiment of the conflicts within the current Caribbean society. We are going to get closer to those readings approaching tragedy, the fall of the historical hero to the present moment, making it an element of subversion, a remote possibility of triumph.

We are going to analyse three works belonging to contexts and expressive media being different but sharing an interest for delineating the figure of the hero regarding violence, leading to an ambiguous representation, which permanently swings between triumph and failure, and flow inevitably into the embodiment of a tragic destiny. Finally, in the chosen three cases the image of the hero comes up from a precise historical context blurred and deconstructed by the artists who, in this way, come closer to the contradictions pointed above, present in the Caribbean cultures. The three of them express an interest for approaching in an oblique, indirect manner, the current context lived by the artists as well as a wish to establish a dialogue between situations of violence in the present moment and social conditions in which creativity rises. Nevertheless, there is a long tradition relating to the representation of violence in contemporary Caribbean art, which aims to give an answer to racial, class, and gender conflicts giving this form to the region. The Caribbean artistic imaginary is full of heroes looking for their place in a culture of

champions, a sort of aesthetic athleticism which, through irony and humour, manifests that only with the distance allowed by mockery some of the conflicts within the Caribbean culture can be invoked. Thus, if we only mention some of the most recent examples, we find in a privileged position the character created by the artist from Curaçao, Tirzo Martha, under the name *Captain Caribbean*. The figure of the captain, attired with a *Kentucky Fried Chicken* (KFC) bucket and goggles, fights against tourism, slavery, and colonization while he admires the figures of the heroes that preceded him. Martha, through a demystifying and mocking strategy establishes a distance from a ritualized official culture, dominated by the respect to an immovable past and the existence of various competing value systems, where rhetoric admiration for past figures becomes mere rhetoric. On the same page are *Super Merengue* o *La Salsa*, two characters created by the Dominican artists Nicolás Dumit Estévez y Raúl Recio, respectively. While the first artist, New York resident since his childhood, introduces the folkloric in the museum in a recreational way, pointing to the limits and the necessity of the identitarian speech at the same time and drawing a frontier between the resources for the popular culture and its classification and reification in the curatorial sphere; in Recio we find a kind of tacky essence of the Dominican, fascinated by consumption and gifted with a high capacity for destruction.

From this point we are going to draw the profile of a hypothetical and metaphoric fight in two chapters in which the representations of the hero obtain an outline and start talking. First of all we are going to analyse the way in which the representation of violence in contemporary Caribbean art introduces a dual element of resistance: aesthetic resistance first, before an artistic system ruled by market and consumption, which rejects the popular visual culture; political resistance next, bringing up a subversion of the nation's assertion system. The hero, then, appears to be linked to transborder. Afterwards, we are going to see the figure of the hero embodying a symbolic resistance based in a game of affirmation-denial which gives significance to a parallel system of values which allows the process of transformation of the heroes to individuals who take a marginalized place in the official system. At this point, we will verify the way violence asserts and subverts at the same time the identity of the Caribbean communities.

1. Setting the stage. Introducing contenders

1.1. 1938. Joe Louis vs Max Schmeling. Concerning *Kid Kapicúa*, by Marcos Lora Read

In 1938, at the peak of Nazism, Joe Louis, a black boxer born in Alabama, took the opportunity to get a rematch with Max Schmeling, the chance for Germany to confirm the supremacy of the Third Reich in boxing and genetics. Two years before, the smart American champion had measured himself with the German boxer at the Yankee Stadium in New York. Back then, Louis was unbeaten and in the peak of his career. Born into a poor family from Alabama, in the twenties we find Louis, with no father, taking a shot in a gymnasium in Detroit. One decade later, in the thirties, Louis “the brown bomber of Detroit” is a champion already, with twenty victories and no defeats. In the summer of 1936, a month before the military uprising that resulted in the Spanish Civil War, Joe Louis was knocked out by Schmeling in all twelve rounds. Nevertheless, after that he would meet the very peak of his career. Next summer, he won the heavyweight title, maintaining the belt for twelve years. By then, Louis had become an idol for black communities in the entire continent, and an emblem of individual success in a context marked by the Great Depression of 1929. The 1938 rematch, then, caught Louis in a key moment of his life. This time, the fight will last only one round, and Louis will be the winner. A year before the outbreak of the First World War, before a multitude of people Louis broke the myth of the superiority of the Aryan race. Despite of all, the two contenders will become friends and Louis will be the champion longer to maintain the heavyweight belt. Since this moment till the year of his retirement, the figure of Louis will achieve a heroic aura. His successes from the twenties will not prevent such aura from disappearing with the years. Forced to fight after retirement due to financial troubles, Louis is defeated by Rocky Marciano in 1951; a year before he had lost the title and the second fight. Since that moment Louis lived in the most abject poverty, this is the reason why he ventures into wrestling and the world of casinos in Las Vegas. Shortly after, at the age of fifty six, he was admitted to a psychiatric clinic. Finally, he died in 1981 without being able to pay for his own funeral. Meanwhile, Max Schmeling, converted to a Nazi emblem when fighting to Louis, would be injured some years after their second combat, fighting during the Second World War, got the headship of Coca-Cola in Germany, a position held till the day of his death. Finally it would be Schmeling who paid for the funeral of his rival as well as for his stay in the sanatorium.

Kid Kapicúa is the title for the homage dedicated to Joe Louis by Marcos Lora Read, a monument to victories ended in defeat being epic and tragic equally. As we will see in two more examples, the artist hides the hero, transforming him in an oblique representation that being so gains efficiency, it is loaded with meaning. In this case, the Atlantic becoming of Louis is represented with a punching ball with stares to its hypothetical rival with the eyes of somebody who knows that it is impossible to dodge the next attack but could withstand it and will remain still. Lora takes the history of Louis and Schmeling to

draw the itinerary for another tale located on *Black Atlantic* by Gilroy (1993), as well as for calculating in an accurate manner, the fees owed by the artist from the called Third World in his constant fight to join the pantheon of the international artistic system.

1.2. Word of Mariana Grajales. *Reconstruyendo al héroe (Reconstructing the hero)* by Javier Castro

It is told that Antonio Maceo was called upon fighting for independence and loving the homeland since the day he was born. The Bronze Titan had the bravery passed on by Mariana Grajales, a mulatta from Santiago which would become a Cuban patriotic emblem. Mariana will make History for giving birth to a dozen of fighters for the independence and for having forged a dozen of consciences compromised with the nationalist cause. Descendants are, then, at the same time gift and sacrifice before the patriotic altar. Mulatto as his parents, Maceo will stand out in the battle against the Spaniards because of his bravery in fighting and his quality as strategist, virtues by which he will have the chance to be promoted regardless of his humble origins or skin colour. In the history of American independencies a kind of popular hero appears, linked to violent processes and opposed to the figure of the intellectual hero, whose voice usually ends by making up the speech which will shape the new nation. The first heroic model is identified, then, with timeless values like courage, bravery or blind commitment. Despite having taken part in the making of political ideals leading to the independence, the figure of Maceo is often opposed to that of Martí, emphasizing the warlike temperament of the first and the intellectual conditions of the second.

The Bronze Titan proved his status of hero and his qualities in the moment of his own death. It has been told that Maceo had twenty-six injuries before he died, reason why he gained a certain reputation of immortality and illustrated adequately the iron will of the hero of not leaving the role assigned to him since the moment of his birth. In a recent video-art piece, Cuban artist Javier Castro approaches Antonio Maceo's death, having the will to examine the process through which the history of the hero is building up, or being the same, the tale's ability to shape the fact and the myth. The video shows twenty-six tales telling violent facts that happened to twenty-six coloured Cubans. However, the owners of the battle wounds do not appear but their mothers are the ones who tell the circumstances in which the confrontation that originated their wounds occurred.

In such context the figure of Maceo is blurred within the twenty-six tales corresponding to those individuals whom we only know by the context selected for us by the artist in the moment he shoots the scene in which the mother describes such fragments of reality

marked by the wound. The author uses the resource of accumulating tales to suggest a continuity between the entrenchment of Maceo as a national hero and the daily life of the Cuban lower class population, whose only chance for heroism is showed in small episodes of daily violence, in the display of the marks received, without the reasons for such marks being clear enough. The connection with Maceo appears through the equivalence of the number of tales and the number of injuries had by the Bronze Titan before his death, by the main characters being blacks or mulattos—invisible on the other hand—, and by an inserted comment in which a mother puts a load of meaning in the figure of the independence hero, linking his figure to the bravery needed for the defence of others: “Bueno, mira, las heridas de Maceo han sido, él ayudando, vaya, separando, a ver si me entiendes, separando a amistades de él que han querido agredirse y lo han agredido a él también”.

There is a distance between the person who focuses the tale and his or her image throughout the entire video. The words from the mothers, which in certain occasions are prolific in explanations, while in other instances barely provide essential data—location of the wound, weapon—, help the audience build up an image of the hero, giving significance to an unseen reality. As in the case of Maceo, the commitment to a greater reality—it being the fight for the nation or any riot defending others—, which sometimes appears diffuse, subsume the person, giving him or her an artificial identity. In all cases, a process of reification of the hero is observed, skilfully handled by the artist, by which the hero is reduced to a selection of facts, to the controversial honour of a scar.

1.3. *Gangstas for Life*. The *dancehall* in the painting of Ebony Patterson

Behind the works of Ebony Patterson that we are going to analyse we will not find a story from the past but a collection of images. In her last series, presented in the *National Gallery of Jamaica* in 2010, the artist has turned to such museum’s masterworks to update them based on the visual resources provided by *dancehall* culture. Academic teaching of art, prevailing on the isle till its Independence, made up an idyllic scenery in which it was intended to translate the European technique of drawing and sculpture to the colonial territory. Reality after 1962, the date of the Independence from the United Kingdom, came marked by major social tensions contradicting the appearance shown by the art from the English times. Approaching such reality from the present moment is what Ebony Patterson’s painting attempts to do.

There are many adjectives linked to *dancehall*. Marginal culture,

resistance culture, culture of transmutation from the holy to the secular in reggae in post-modern times. In any case, *Dancehall* has been analysed from a temporal perspective, or linked to a present in which it is the object of conflict or business (or both at the same time) or else linked to a mystified past from which some elements are rescued (Paul, 2009). *Dancehall* has been synonym of controversy, defiance, resistance. Resistance to culture, to the social and sexual order of Jamaican culture, to the models for socialization based on hierarchies. Its critics as well as its supporters agree in its radicalism against other Caribbean cultural manifestations, something that Donna Hope has explained, rooting *dancehall* practices to the context of an urban and post-modern Caribbean (Hope, 2006).

In her last series, Patterson presented a collection of six works in which she replied to the more representative works from Caribbean Art History. In it we assist to a deconstruction of the masculinity found in *gangsta* culture, marked by the territorialisation of the urban space in neighbourhoods controlled by personal powers generating a phenomenon of clientelism, establishing violence as a factor of order and respect against the inability of national power to prevail. At the same time, the artist inserts questioning about representation systems in Jamaican culture, in which race still has an important discriminatory role. Patterson introduces haloed youths, enthroned by a baroque accumulation of elements of ostentation around them, whose faces have been bleached using a chemical product being possibly dangerous for their health. Skin *bleaching* or whitening, an usual phenomenon in countries where the bulk of the population is black, is a challenge to defining identity (Paul, 2008). It is a resource for achieving more preponderance in a system with a black majority that still considers the gradation of skin colour as a factor for social differentiation. Patterson's portraits, then, presuppose a contradictory element. Popular heroes in the work of Patterson show the injuries from war too, but masking it through an aestheticization of violence which, in passing, is used by the artist to analyse the culture in which she lives.

2. First round. On the hero and the aesthetic and political subversion of Caribbean imaginaries

A boxer who does not end up losing the fights he has won; the mothers from an unusually absent and forcefully tragic community; the unlikely beauty of violence. The three works introduced link the historical and national speech and the context of popular culture, looking for the possibility of transferring heroism to the current conditions of the Caribbean social reality. At the same time, in the three cases there is an interest for establishing the position that the

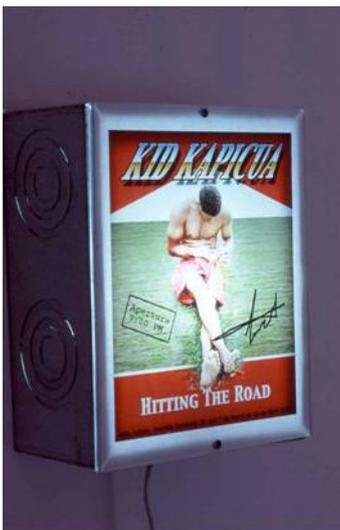
artist maintains as a privileged subject in such reality. Then, the using of violence linked to the figure of the hero inserts a dual element of resistance: aesthetical, against an artist system ruled by market and consumption, that rejects popular visual culture; and political, arising a subversion of official systems of values. Both elements create a transborder practice that destabilizes the distance between insular and international, and breaks the barriers between the “highbrow” and the “popular”. In the three cases, the heroic is sheltered in the popular, analysing a situation in which ritualized urban violence is the only possible scenario for the hero.

The case of *Kid Kapicúa*, the alter ego created by Marcos Lora for Joe Louis can be linked to the Marco Polo syndrome defined in the beginning of the 90’s by Gerardo Mosquera as the cultural inability to assimilate one’s own difference and that of others, as well as those who pretend to position the frontiers between both terms. In Mosquera’s words:

We had to wait until the end of the millennium to discover that we were suffering from the Marco Polo Syndrome. What is monstrous about this syndrome is that it perceives whatever is different as the carrier of life-threatening viruses rather than nutritional elements. And although it does not scare us as much as another prevalent syndrome, it has brought a lot of death to culture (Mosquera, 2005: 218).

Mosquera’s trajectory, whose education initiated in the Dominican Republic, but developed in Europe mainly, out of the constrictions of the national environment and in permanent touch with the international art media, offers a good example of the affection introduced by him. Lora belongs to the group of artists that, beginning in the 90’s, shaped what today is called Caribbean art, in those days only an appendix, sometimes cut off, of the big *boom* of Latin-American art. The place of the artist will be noted by a double limitation: an internal one, because of not being within the national art system and using an international visual language and an external one, as an artist from the outskirts who exhibits in the large global art centres. In this context, the figure of Louis, *Kid Kapicúa*, appears as a possibility to escape from this double lack of understanding. Resistance, the creative act of fighting (artistically in the case of Lora, physically in the case of Louis) arises as the only possibility for redemption, as the only possible triumph. No wonder, Louis is defeated, losing his real condition of champion, to acquire his aura of legend—and the problems that took him in the grave— when he stops fighting, in the moment when a recount of his fights is done. The artist seems to say that there is no achievement out of the boxing and arts *ring*; everything is achieved within. In this way, Lora points to the limitations of the artist from outskirts when trying to be understood, but he transcends the limitations of complaint to bring up a catharsis, an option to convert defeat into victory. This way, creativity becomes

a subversive and heroic resource of first rate, a tool for generating spaces to dialogue in which relations between centre and outskirts leave its way to a more horizontal system for negotiation, being able to link various regions mutually excluded, dissolving a vision of the difference which is parallel to a threat and guaranteeing opportunities for the integration of artists from the outskirts.



Pictures 1 and 2. Marcos Lora Read. *Kid Kapicúa*.

Duality between artistic and political dimensions of the representation of the hero is strong in the case of Javier Castro too. One of the resources mostly used by the artist, the selection of realistic scenes, not modified apparently, however hiding a strong and intentional load, is used in *Reconstruyendo al héroe* (Reconstructing the hero) to bring to the present the sacrificial heroism of Grajales and Maceo, so as to point to the limitations of any act of resistance. If in the case of Maceo, the absolute of the pursued ideal —the nation, a whole that embraces and represents a population that will never be homogeneous— operates as an absolute goal, in the twenty six examples selected the artist has deleted such goal. In many cases

we don't know the reason why they fight, the reason why the new Maceos are injured. On the other hand, they are not the ones in control of the speech; neither are their mothers, replacements of the History with capital letter that envelops the figure of Grajales. On the contrary, it is the artist who sets himself up in a position of authority just to defy the conditions under which the arts system appropriates such position and subverts the speech of the artist, so as to point out to the construct character of what we see. Thus, if in the case of Kid Kapicúa violence appears as an act of resistance, this time around we are placed before an exercise of autocriticism. We attend a narration of heroic deeds that we do not see and that are executed by heroes from a forgotten story.

Javier Castro links the revision for the stance of the witness within historical speech, the analysis for the construct character of such speech, and the denunciation of existing inequalities —not just differences— within this big *ajiaco* introduced by Fernando Ortiz as the Cuban culture (Ortiz, 2002). Racial conflicts, already analysed in the context of the Cuban arts through the three issues of *Queloides*¹, are introduced as one of the elements silenced both by the myth of the nation behind the heroism of Maceo and by the historical evolution of Cuban arts. Choosing twenty-six cases of violence suffered by black individuals, Castro refers to a reality where the ideal for which Maceo sacrificed himself is not carried out. Then, the work of Castro is here to tell us that violence arises as the only redoubt for the heroism of the represented individuals; or, in the other way around, that every assertion of difference is condemned in the current context of the violence imposed by a system that defends uniformity before the national ideal as supreme value. By appealing to Maceo, the artist gets to multiply the meanings of the work, managing to fully insert it in the current Cuban context and at the same time to open his interpretation to a global perspective, referring to the social body of any community in the World. Within this second sphere, featured in all of Javier Castro's video works, the artist makes a persevering inquiry, referring to existing exclusions in every society, as well as to the violence generated as a result of the existence of such exclusions. The harsh representation of information helps to insert a relativistic nuance on the heroic past of the nation and on the transgressive scene of Cuban arts.

The same subversion of national symbols is found in the series by Patterson. If as is pointed by David Boxer, the work by the artist unifies the aesthetics of high art and low art (Boxer, 2010: 25), we could go further pointing that introducing the culture of dancehall and the gangster in the space of the museum manages to confront the public, still a minority, against a reality considered alien to them. Through the act of aestheticization of violence, that which could look like a "light work" is shown as a powerful tool when deconstructing

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1 | The exhibitions took place in 1997, 1999 and 2010. On the same vein the Centro Provincial de Artes Plásticas y Diseño celebrated the exhibition *Ni músicos ni deportistas* in 1999.

cultural patterns that establish the national taste.

3. Second round. Systems of values

If the appeal to the hero manages to translate resistance into the political and aesthetical spheres, visual representation of violence appears linked to another venture not less important: the creation of a parallel system of values which challenges the inflexibility of the social structures appearing in the Caribbean cultures. The heroes recovered from popular culture by the three chosen artists use alternative means to distinguish themselves from the whole of society, to obtain a recognition that otherwise would be forbidden for them. Likewise, the three speeches belong to an affected context where the inequalities are incremented as a consequence of globalized markets and the development of capitalism. Within a consumer society in which the cultural referents are no longer local, individual triumph constitutes a way to acquire power, a system of enthronement alternative to that established by differences of race, class, and genre.

Racial and class problems are the first determinant considered in the three works: in the case of Lora, the story of Louis, to whom his “culture of origin” denies the triumph achieved, involves a reference to the Dominican system of values in which racial differentiation is the first element of personal identification—a section of the Dominican National Identity Document still states a racial group for the individual—; on their part, the wounded heroes by Castro were forced into an environment where violence constitutes the only means of protection; finally, the *gangsters* by Patterson fall in the contradiction of bleaching their skin for being accepted, asserting themselves as coloured violent individuals at the same time. On the three projects an interest in deconstructing the masculinity of the hero understood as an individual who states his bravery and who is defined through violence is detected. If *Kid Kapicúa* is the ultimate boxer because he is been reduced to his fighting function, an object which returns punches when faced by the inability for adapting to a reality forbidden to him; characters from *Reconstruyendo al héroe (Reconstructing the Hero)* present an ambiguous situation. The individual appears defending his manliness or protecting some defenceless woman or friend; however, the lack of information provided by the artist—one mother says “yo no me encontraba en el hecho” (Castro, 2007)— make us second-guess the role of the heroes conferred by the speech from the mothers, suddenly being interchangeable with that of the victim. Through this gesture the figure of the hero is lost instead of being reconstructed, it is postponed before the evidence of the power of violence in the current Cuban reality. In the words of

the artist:



Picture 3. Ebony Patterson. *Di Real Big Man*.

En esta obra lo que me interesaba era ver una relación entre la figura de Maceo como símbolo de coraje, de resistencia física, de valentía, y la realidad cubana actual, en el sentido de la violencia. Cómo, por ejemplo, hay un héroe que es el paradigma de los cubanos precisamente por ser capaz de coger un arma y salir a luchar. Eso mismo se ve reflejado en la realidad actual. [...] Estos son los Maceos de la actualidad, son la gente que toman las armas y salen a la calle, son la gente que tienen cicatrices, pero ya de una batalla cotidiana, no una batalla histórica y heroica, sino la del día a día, que es la que de alguna manera te deja las cicatrices en el cuerpo².

In a similar manner, the portraits by Patterson bring to the table the aesthetical gesture implied in every act of resistance in a consumer society. The abundance of ornaments, gold chains, certain dressing patterns, constitutes not so much an identity as an element of fashion. The artist stops then, to analyse the way the affirmation of strength and homophobia within the lyrics and the attitude of dancehall culture coexists with a certain “feminization” of man. On the basis of questioning the parallel systems of values in the popular culture, systems that help to distinguish the individual who has a subordinate position within the whole community, the analysed Caribbean artists create symbolic representations of violence entailing the possibility to bleed social differentiations. This way violence, without denying the official values, asserts and subverts at the same time.

4. *Knockout*. Conclusions

Lets stop for a moment at the instant immediately before the champion falling by K.O. The abundance of representations of the hero in the current Caribbean imaginary are to be related to the burst of a consumer culture, which has placed individual triumph as the top goal and generated an imaginary in which the violence appears linked to social and racial inequality; this personal way arises also as

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2 | Personal interview with Javier Castro, conducted in La Habana at 6 of March of 2010.

a consequence of the fail of utopian initiatives and collective politics, the contradictions in the process of creating the nation. Finally, the image of the hero is a counterpart to the situation of the Caribbean artist, who like them must “fight” under conditions imposed by the national and international artistic media.

There is a large tradition of heroic figures in the Caribbean. Past and present are unified under the glance made by the artist aiming to refer to that emptiness present in the History of the region. In this context real violence and symbolic violence are melted and the defeat of the hero becomes a reference, almost a historic document of the epistemic violence eroding the Caribbean past. Along the years Marcos Lora has worked using gnaw material, historical books, and documents modified by the artist, giving them the aspect of a living object, with an evolution, with a memory. The artist justified such use of the document pointing that paper does not stand fine at the Tropic³. This simple, objective explanation reveals soon an extremely powerful, deep load. Tropical climatology joins forces with Antillean History, and takes the artist into questioning the function and the veracity of the historic document, in a movement distinguished as a recurrent factor in the current arts by Okwui Enwezor (Enwezor, 2008).

The Caribbean hero is mediated and mediatic. Almost always he is an “oblique hero” too, choosing alternative ways to the values accepted by official morals. The resistance of such tragic hero takes place in the moment of *knockout*, at the instant when he is released from the acquired representational values to speak from his own perspective; it is there, at this point of the written history and the learned lesson, when the artist takes part to rise portraits that are disfigured and incomplete but have the capacity to open doors and make questions. The defeat of the hero becomes a possibility for the artist to repair the memory, but also to pose a major question against the creative production in the present moment too, about the distance between in and out, about inequalities within the Caribbean societies and, to sum up, about the somehow heroic position which the artist has to take respecting violence in such societies.

NOTES

3 | Personal interview with Marcos Lora Read, conducted in Santo Domingo at 24 of June of 2010.

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