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"Love American Style": Race, Cuban Identity and Cultural Tyranny in Showtime's *Dexter*

The television series, *Dexter* (Oct 2006 – present), explores the life of the fictional, white serial killer, Dexter Morgan, a blood spatter analyst for the police force based in Miami Florida. The series contains what Ewan Kirkland describes as "an admirably multiracial cast", as it features Hispanic, black, Asian and white characters (210). The Cuban population in Florida has been widely documented in censuses; Sharon Ennis states that there are 1, 212, 418 Cubans living in Florida (8). Miami Dade has the largest concentration of Cubans in its populace. According to Planning Research "Within the Hispanic or Latino population the largest group is Cubans that account for more than one-half [52.7 percent] of the Hispanic population or 34.3 percent of the total population" of Miami-Dade (1). In terms of diaspora, Cubans are certainly well represented in *Dexter*, with a number of prominent characters in both law enforcement as well as the greater civilian population. A number of characters including Lt. Maria LaGuerta (Lauren Velez) and Sgt. Angel Batista (David Zayas) have been in the show from the beginning. Characters such as Assistant District Attorney Miguel Prado (Jimmy Smitts) featured in an entire season (Season 3) and others such as Jorge Castillo (José Zúñiga), who is central to the main discussion in this article, appears in just one episode. As well as diasporic representations viewers see and hear an abundance of Cuban food, religion, music and culture. A number of Cuban characters often hold unsubtitled Spanish conversations with one another. Thus, *Dexter* presents an authentic representation of Miami through its embrace of the Cuban population and its cultural rituals. This article focuses on the representation of Cubans in *Dexter* using the episode, "Love American Style" (1.5) in which Jorge Castillo appears, as a case in point. While almost all characters in *Dexter*

are flawed in some way, the Cuban characters really stand out in this respect. It is worth discussing a number of these characters across different seasons of the show before focusing on Jorge Castillo. Cuban characters are generally well represented in numbers and in social status, often occupying positions of respect in their careers and communities. However, they also tend to be power hungry, highly manipulative, sexually deviant and sometimes murderous.

For example, María LaGuerta, lieutenant of Miami Metro Homicide Department, is portrayed as having climbed to power through her political manipulation of the Cuban masses and the media in Miami. María is often portrayed as engaging in sexually inappropriate behaviour towards work colleagues such as the protagonist, Dexter Morgan (Michael C. Hall). The first time we are introduced to María in the pilot episode titled "Dexter" she is surrounded by a horde of media attention while at the same time openly flirting with Dexter who is clearly uncomfortable with her behaviour. As María gives Dexter an overtly sexual wink, apparently unconcerned that the news cameras are rolling, we hear Dexter in voiceover thinking, "I wish she'd stop that. It's one of those mating rituals which I really don't understand." Dexter's reference to "mating" reduces María's seductive overtures to a primitive act that removes any sense of emotion from her flirtation.

Angel Batista is a detective in the Homicide department. As series One progresses we learn that Angel has been unfaithful, is in the process of a divorce and frequently indulges in alcohol and casual sex, or, as he calls it "*la passion*." The use of his mother tongue in this way provides a definite linguistic link between Angel's Cuban identity and his sexual desires. We also see Angel indulging in illegal solicitation of prostitutes, and his sexual appetite even leads him into a trap of being

falsely accused of rape in season Two. Thus, his career and reputation are constantly put at risk due to his dubious behaviour.

The Third season centres on a Cuban villain who confirms the racial stereotypes discussed here: Miguel Prado, assistant district attorney of Miami, is a murderous, manipulative, power hungry Cuban alpha male living under the guise of high social status and respect. Miguel appears to be a celebrity of sorts in the Cuban community, receiving praise and admiration for his high success rate in reprimanding criminals. However, despite this admirable exterior, Miguel unravels as a messy, volatile murderer. In his article, "Dexter's Whiteness," Kirkland juxtaposes Miguel and Dexter to display a clear racial contrast:

> While the practised killer [Dexter] remains attached and aloof, unclouded by emotion, the DA [Miguel] pursues a personal vendetta against Ellen Wolf whom he messily murders then dumps into an open grave. Dexter sleeps soundly in his bed untroubled by the atrocities he has committed, but Miguel has restless nights. While Dexter has a granite set of ethics, Miguel has no dead white man's Code to live by and, as a consequence, spirals out of control (212).

Hence, when Miguel's hot-headed Cuban identity is contrasted with Dexter's typical white male serial killer stereotype, it becomes clear that characters in the series are constructed in close accordance with their racial backgrounds. These characters demonstrate that voracious appetites for sex, power and violence are closely associated with Cuban identity in *Dexter*.

A close examination of "Love American Style", the fifth episode of the first season illuminates further the issues of race and identity of Cuban characters. In this episode the protagonist, Dexter, is stalking his next kill, Jorge Castillo, a human

trafficker and cold blooded killer. If Jorge's customers cannot pay a release fee on entering the States under his protection he drowns them and dumps their bodies in the ocean off the coast of Florida. When the bodies wash ashore it looks like yet another failed illegal crossing from Cuba to Florida. Castillo is wealthy, living in an ocean-front mansion with his blonde, blue-eyed, all-American wife. He drives expensive cars, owns a boat and is self-employed, running a junkyard business which operates as a front for his illegal activities. Jorge and his wife view their luxurious lifestyle as the epitome of the American dream and the cornerstone of their marriage:

> JORGE CASTILLO: We want the same life.
>
> VALERIE CASTILLO: We want the same thing
>
> DEXTER MORGAN: You share the same dream?
>
> VALERIE CASTILLO, JORGE CASTILLO: Yes that's it.

Thus, Jorge's extravagant lifestyle and ideal marriage to a beautiful white woman demonstrate his attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture of North America. Critics such as Frantz Fanon have commented on intermarriage and the role of white women in assimilation. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon states that men of colour often engage in relationships with white women "to be acknowledged not as black but as white . . . who but a white woman can do this for me? By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love . . . I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness" (63). In the case of Jorge and Valerie's marriage it can be argued that she is a trophy wife attesting to her husband's success in climbing up the racial ranks and assimilating into the dominant white society of the United States.

The title of the episode, "Love American Style", is derived from a television show of the same name which first aired in America in 1969. It was an anthology comedy series that featured a line-up of celebrity guest stars appearing in anywhere

from one to four short stories within an hour and that focused on versions of love and romance. The opening theme of the "Love American Style" show bombards viewers with a visual and lyrical display of white American patriotism. A plethora of nationalistic images including the American flag with fireworks in the background symbolise American notions of freedom and independence because these images are particularly evocative of American Independence Day celebrations which occur annually on the fourth of July. In his article "U.S. Independence Day a Civic and Social Event: Americans celebrate July 4, 1776, adoption of Declaration of Independence," Michael Jay Friedman describes the annual celebration as "a major civic occasion, with roots deep in the Anglo-American tradition of political freedom." The lyrics of the opening song refer to a love that is greater than "the red white and blue" of the American flag and on a "star-spangled night," alluding to the American national anthem. The distinctively Anglo American national pride and patriotism we see in this mid-twentieth century show is emblematic of Jorge's vision of the "American Dream," thus displaying a deliberate thematic link between this episode of *Dexter* and the mid-twentieth century show of the same name

In a discussion of the representation of "culturally plural societies" (151) Stuart Cunningham argues that "Much diasporic cultural expression is a struggle for survival, identity and assertion, and it can be a struggle as much enforced by the necessities of coming to terms with the dominant culture as it is freely assumed" (154). In an endorsement of Cunningham's assertion, this article examines Jorge's denial and betrayal of his ethnic identity in order to achieve his desire of living the "American dream." Ultimately his Cuban ethnicity is effectively "othered" by his actions and therefore his identity remains on the margins and borders of American society. Chicana theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa says of the US that "the only 'legitimate'

inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger" (25-6). Jorge not only aligns himself with white Americans, but even claims to be one, thus denying his Cuban origins and exploiting other Cuban immigrants in order to achieve the class status and material goods needed to pass as a privileged American. His use of Cuban immigrants to finance his assimilation highlights the tension between his true identity and his desired one. Thus, Jorge is clearly caught in the border between Cuban and US culture and identity. Anzaldúa states that "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge" (25). In view of this statement, Jorge's border identity is evident through the symbolism of his junkyard which is filled with used car parts and rusting vehicles including an old family camper van, symbolic of his desire to accumulate the material goods necessary to fully assimilate into dominant American society. The cars and motor vehicles that Jorge has accumulated are broken down, defunct and immobile, representative of Jorge's flawed and morally tainted chasing of the American dream. Dexter makes a similar observation during his visit to Jorge's work premises stating that:

> I don't understand America's obsession with cars. I can just imagine squeezing Rita and the kids into this thing [camper van], hitting the open road, cramped quarters, public bathrooms, hours of nothing but conversation. Someone's American dream, my nightmare.

Behind this public business Jorge uses his fishing boat to operate his human trafficking enterprise, drowning illegal immigrants and condemning their bodies to the body of water that Jorge surely crossed in pursuit of his new life as an affluent

American citizen. The junkyard that is filled with dilapidated vehicles and the fishing boat he uses to transport and murder illegal immigrants are symbolic of Jorge's perception of the dominant culture in the US and the mobility that it affords those who are part of it. However, the deadly role that these defunct and disguised vehicles play in Jorge's flawed efforts to facilitate his American lifestyle is indicative of his eventual failure.

Furthermore, the dialogue that passes between Dexter and Jorge about boats and sailing during the serial killer's visit to Jorge's junkyard is significant. Jorge's wry comment that he has "a row boat with a hole in it" expresses the murderous and monetary function that his fishing vessel plays in his tyrannical treatment of his Cuban customers. In her essay "Eating the Other" bell hooks observes that "cultural, ethnic and racial differences will be continually commoditifed and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate" and "the other will be eaten, consumed and forgotten" (39). In this case "the other" is drowned, submerged and concealed within the body of water that forms the border between Cuba and America to aid in Jorge's assimilation and passing within the dominant American culture. Elaine K. Ginsberg states that passing is about "the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing" (2). The drowning and submergence of illegal immigrants represents Jorge's metaphorical drowning of his own ethnic background. Jorge profits from his part in the human trafficking industry and then proceeds to immerse his connections with Cuba in the body of water that he himself once crossed in search of his "American Dream."

During their maritime conversation Dexter's quip in Spanish which translates as "Perhaps the fish will find you" is also of an ominous and prophetic nature as Jorge is soon to meet his death at Dexter's hands and will then be dumped at sea like his

victims. Following this, we have seen that Jorge denies his ability to speak Spanish saying, “I’m American pal, just like you.” However, later in the episode, we see Jorge ordering a group of terrified Cuban immigrants into captivity in his junkyard speaking mostly in Spanish, further evidence of his rejection of his Cuban origins.

Jorge’s rejection of his race, language and culture, as well as his blatant tyranny against his own people fragment his identity, symbolised by the severed chunks of his remains that are tossed into the oceanic border space by Dexter. Following his death under Dexter’s blade, Jorge’s final resting place relocates him within the border between Cuba and America thus metaphorically returning him to the Cuban identity he left behind in his failed attempt to immerge seamlessly into the dominant American culture. Despite his attempts to pass as American, Jorge’s abuse of his cultural knowledge for personal and financial gain only results in a violent clash of differing identities. Jorge cannot escape his “border” identity no matter how well he masquerades as a member of the dominant culture of the U.S. Anzaldúa defines borders and borderlands as open wounds that never close, spaces where “the third world grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture” (25). Jorge’s liminal identity emulates Anzaldúa’s description of border cultures as continuous collisions of converging and diverging identities, cultures and places.

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