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A F R O B O R I C U A ?

Puerto Rico: The pleasures and traumas of race

ALAN WEST-DURÁN

ABSTRACT

Writers and thinkers as diverse as Tomás Blanco, Luis Palés Matos, José Luis González, and Isabelo Zenón Cruz have grappled with the issue of the island's Afro-Caribbean identity, ranging from denial (Blanco) to full affirmation (González). Apart from some historical background, this paper will focus on perceptions of race in Puerto Rican literature (and music) from the island and the U.S. The latter is crucial not only because of U.S. colonial history on the island, but also because of the racial experiences of Puerto Ricans who have emigrated to (or were raised in) the U.S. The paper will examine the jíbaro myth, Palés Matos's poetry, and the representation of racial identities in authors such as Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, Tato Laviera, Rosario Ferré, Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, and Mayra Santos Febre. It will draw on and critically discuss critics and thinkers from Puerto Rico, other parts of the Caribbean (Ortiz, Fanon, Glissant, and Stuart Hall). [Keywords: race, mulatto/mulatez, history of race relations, national identity, gender and race]

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UERTO RICO'S RACIAL HISTORY IS

centuries old, sometimes troubled, always intricately layered, plagued by misunderstandings and denials, laced with insights, and just plain vexing. In what follows we will examine some of those baffling complexities through some canonical works of literature: *La cuarterona* by Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, “Mulata-Antilla” by Luis Palés Matos, *Maldito Amor* by Rosario Ferré, “Negrito” by Tato Laviera, Edgardo Rodríguez Julia’s *El entierro de Cortijo*, and Mayra Santos Febre’s short story “Marina.” These works will be discussed in the light of Žižek’s analysis of the Lacanian Real as it pertains to nationalist *jouissance*, Foucault’s notion of bio-power, and Bauman’s analysis of how societies deal with otherness.

This article addresses only six authors spanning the last one hundred thirty years, and so it would be misleading to think that what follows is either exhaustive or “representative.” Each work or author has something important to say about race and identity in the construction of Puerto Rican national consciousness, and they have been chosen because as writers their views are not only steeped in history, but also are engagingly nuanced with regard to the island’s racial plight.

In 1937, Tomás Blanco, one of the island’s seminal writers and thinkers, wrote the following: “Compared to the most intense explosions of that virulent behavior, our racial prejudice is the innocent game of a child” (Blanco 1985: 103). Blanco was contrasting Puerto Rico with the southern United States, and the comparison made several references to lynchings, segregation, and Jim Crow. Blanco’s criticisms are all true with regard to his analysis of the U.S., but when looking homeward, his critical perspective is conspicuously absent. During most of his essay, “Racial Prejudice in Puerto Rico,” he offers a benign (and inaccurate) racial history of the island, drawing a portrait suffused with Hispano-Catholic compassion, if not condescension. Two years earlier, in a classic essay, “Elogio de la plena,” Blanco had written: “We have abundant black blood in us, and this should not make us feel ashamed; but, in honoring the truth, we cannot be classified as a black people” (Blanco 1975: 1004). The inconsistencies and racism of Blanco’s insights have not held up well, even though his views are still echoed by some.¹

Thirty-seven years later Isabelo Zenón Cruz spoke of the hypocrisy of the expression *negro puertorriqueño*, where Puerto Rican has become an adjective. Why is a black Puerto Rican identified as black before he is considered Puerto Rican, he sarcastically asks in his monumental two-volume study *Narciso descubre su trasero* [Narcissus Discovers his Backside]. Zenón Cruz’s painstaking analysis, more than 700 pages long, of historical documents, poems, literature, jokes, religion, lyrics to songs, and popular culture is a landmark study that perhaps not so curiously has been out of print for more than two decades.

Not long after Zenón, writer José Luis González stated in 1979 that Puerto Rico was basically an Afro-Caribbean nation in *El país de cuatro pisos* [*The Four-Storeyed Country*, 1993]. Using an architectural metaphor, he said the first and foundational floor of the island edifice was laid down by black slaves, and that subsequent floors (Spanish, European, and North American) have elaborated on, changed, or transformed these African origins. Gonzalez’s essay engendered substantial debate and

controversy, and to date it still remains—whatever its flaws—a crucial reference in the intellectual discourse on race and identity.

These writers reflect the tensions and contradictions in examining the racial dimensions of Puerto Rican identity, and could be broadly described as Hispanicist (with racist overtones), anti-racist, and Afrocentric. Most *boricuas* would claim a mixed-raced heritage in a cultural sense, but a more whitened definition in a strictly racial sense. Some of this ambiguity might be partially explained by the most recent census (2000), since for the first time since 1950 Puerto Ricans answered questions about race in an official census. The country’s racial reality, however, might be too elusive to capture on a governmental form. Social scientist Jorge Duany, trying to imagine this incongruity, alludes to the racial complexities of the island by offering a long but by no means exhaustive list of terms most commonly used: *blanco* (white), *blanquito* (upper class or well-to-do white), *colorao* (white with reddish hair), *rubio* (blonde), *cano* (person with grey or whitening hair and light skin color), *jincho* (pasty or flour-colored white), *blanco con raja* (white with a streak of color), *jabao* (mixed race with light skin and chestnut or blond hair but with other “black” physical features), *melao* (honey-colored), *trigueño* (wheat-colored, light brown), *moreno* (dark skinned-mulatto or black), *mulato*, *indio* (Indian, bronze colored), *café con leche* (coffee with milk), *piel canela* (cinamon-skinned), *grifo* (kinky-haired, black), *de color* (of color), *negro* (black), and *negrito* (a small or little black person). Many of these terms, depending on attitude and tone, can be expressions of endearment, grudging acceptance, contempt, or condescension (Duany 2000; see also Stephens 1999). Despite this complexity, whiteness is still considered the norm, as will be argued further on, given both sociological data and literary examples.

What Blanco, Zenón, González, and Duany address, directly or indirectly, is a complex racial history that is both local and yet intersects with the racial dynamics of two imperial powers: Spain (1493–1898) and the United States (1898 to the present). Before analyzing the literary works previously mentioned, it is germane to retrace some of the salient features of the island’s racial history.

Spanish colonization and slavery

Puerto Rico, unlike the French, Dutch, and English-speaking Caribbean, developed its sugar plantation system late (1795–1850). From 1600 on, the island never had a slave population that was greater than 15 percent of the total population, and usually the figure hovered from 5 percent to 9 percent. In the French islands it averaged from 80 percent to 90 percent; in the British colonies, from 75 percent to 95 percent. From 1775 to 1873, the year slavery was abolished, the racial composition of Puerto Rican society was roughly as follows: whites, 40 to 55 percent; free non-whites, 40 to 50 percent; and slaves, 5 to 15 percent (West-Durán 2003).

These percentages reflect several realities: Puerto Rico experienced greater racial mixture than elsewhere in the Caribbean, its economy was not completely dominated by sugar, and its relative lack of importance (compared to Mexico, Peru, and Cuba) were all factors that uniquely shaped Puerto Rico as a non-plantation society. Even in the period in which sugar gained ascendancy (1795–1850), many “free” laborers worked alongside slaves. And, finally, like its Spanish-speaking counterparts, a Creole consciousness and nationalism created pro-independence movements by the 1820s, even though many famous 19th-century abolitionists (Tapia, Acosta, Quiñones) were *autonomistas* or *asimilistas*. Again, unlike what happened to its non-Spanish speaking neighbors, Puerto Rico’s abolition of slavery and independence were intertwined. This difference in part explains why Spain’s Caribbean colonies

had become free of their former masters by the end of the nineteenth century, while in the rest of the Caribbean independence would be achieved from the 1950s through the 1980s. The Dutch, English, and French Caribbean abolished slavery without making national sovereignty a part of the agenda. The one exception, of course, is an important one, since Haiti's independence resulted from a slave revolt that abolished slavery. This confluence of independence and abolition catalyzed the historical and economic transformations of Cuba and Puerto Rico in the 19th century, not to mention the panic it caused in the Caribbean plantocracy.

Unlike slaves, the free colored could travel freely on the island, gather publicly in groups, dance in the streets, and own stores. Free non-whites could acquire land in whatever quantities, as well as inherit property without restrictions. They could enter the crafts, acquire an education, even if rudimentary, and serve in the militia, albeit in segregated units. Serving in the militia allowed them to bear arms—normally prohibited to free coloreds or slaves—but those arms were primarily used against slaves. Despite these possibilities, there were many activities and opportunities only enjoyed by whites: a university education, public offices or honors, being notaries or holding positions in the Church. Of course, the free colored were still part of the “contaminated castes,” according to the racial hierarchy under Spanish colonialism. However, for either free coloreds or slaves, bravery in battle or similar such deeds could ease any (or all) of these restrictions. For example, slaves who fought bravely repelling the British attack on San Juan in 1797 were freed.

The demographic, social, and cultural importance of a free colored population might explain a painter like José Campeche (1751–1809), the mulatto son of an emancipated slave. Campeche's work depicts government officials, the ruling elite, and religious themes with great nuance, detail, and use of color. Given the demographic, racial, and social realities of the English, French, and Dutch Caribbean, it is hard to conceive of a Campeche-like figure, except for maybe in Trinidad or Curaçao, which also had high rates of free-colored populations.

The nineteenth century: Sugar and slaves

With roughly half of the population white and a slave population of between 5 percent and 15 percent during the years of Spanish control, can Puerto Rico be assumed to be a Caribbean exception, a country where slavery mattered little and whose culture and society is not Afro-Antillean? Many have argued that point, using the *Ībaro*, or the rugged mountain peasant of the interior (presumed to be white, since the black populations allegedly lived mostly in the coastal areas), as the cultural and national symbol of the island.²

A closer look reveals a different reality. Roughly half the population was still black and mulatto in 1830, when the island had three times as many slaves than in 1790. Three historical events gave slavery in Puerto Rico greater importance than statistics would indicate: the independence of Haiti (1804), creating the first independent and black nation in Latin America, the independence of the former Spanish colonies (1810–1826), and the outlawing of the slave trade by Britain (1807), Denmark (1807), France (1818), and Holland (1814). In the nineteenth century Haiti's role as the world's largest producer of sugar fell to Cuba and to Puerto Rico to a lesser degree (West-Durán 2003).

In the first half of the nineteenth century sugar (aside from coffee) represented about half of the island's exports and in the 1850s Puerto Rico produced as much sugar as Jamaica, Antigua, Martinique, and Barbados combined. Not surprisingly, from 1795 to 1848 historian Guillermo A. Baralt has documented more than twenty instances of slave conspiracies, rebellions, or insurrections (not all were carried out

since some were thwarted by informers) (Baralt 1982: 156–7). In 1826 local legislation was enacted to curtail this rebelliousness. Unlike the 1789 Spanish Slave Code, which the Spanish Crown crafted to protect certain rights of slaves (even if often ignored), the 1826 edict, “Regulations concerning the Education, Treatment and Occupations that Owners and Overseers should give to their Slaves on this Island,” was meant to protect slave masters and their underlings. For example, machetes and other work tools had to be stored away every day, slaves were told when and where they could rest, and there were prohibitions against visiting slaves from other plantations.

Even worse was the Edict against the African Race of 1848, which virtually erased any distinction between Africans who were free and those who were slaves. Africans who were found guilty of striking a white person lost their right hand. Threatening a white person could earn non-whites a five-year jail sentence. Fortunately, this edict lasted only six months and was abolished under a new governor, but its psychological and social aftermath must have been a chilling reminder that whites were in control and could unleash a brutal, racialized repression any time they felt threatened (West-Durán 2003).

Mulatas, madness and misce(nation)

By the mid-1860s, it was clear that slavery's days were numbered. The play *La cuarterona* (1867), by Alejandro Tapia y Rivera (1826–1882), seems simultaneously to belie that reality and prophesy its demise. The play deals with a romance between an upper class white male and a quadroon servant, revealing the human, psychological, and emotional destructiveness of racism and slavery. Because of censorship Tapia placed the action in Havana.

Arguably the best play of nineteenth-century Puerto Rico, Tapia's work, which in English would read “The Quadroon” (or, more accurately, “Julia, The Quadroon”), is a complex and emblematic portrait of Puerto Rico's tangled social, racial, and sexual politics under Spanish colonialism in the waning years of slavery.

Tapia eclectically places lyrical flights of romanticism within a realist dramaturgy, which keeps the work from becoming overly melodramatic. The author wastes no time in presenting the amorous problems unleashed by racial injustice. The first scene is between Carlos, a young, white aristocrat, and Jorge, his servant, a black slave. Carlos has recently returned from France, and they speak about Julia, the quadroon, whom Carlos is in love with. Julia is not a slave. He does not admit this love to the slave, but instead pumps him for information about Julia's behavior in his absence. Jorge, the ever-obedient slave, tells his master about Julia's tears and her emotional volatility. Despite the stereotypical submissiveness of Jorge, Tapia has skillfully set up a racial and social triangle that will later be echoed by an amorous triangle as well. Interestingly, Jorge's information about his master comes by way of Julia, a route analogous to the way Julia's information is provided to Carlos through Jorge. This is understandable since Carlos has been physically absent, and a first reminder that absence and lack are important structural and symbolic elements of the play.

Jorge exits and Carlos's ensuing short monologue reveals much of what will transpire in the play. He says that Julia loves him, but quickly adds that this is a “disparate, una locura” (nonsense, foolishness, madness). He imagines, however, Julia's reaction, claiming that she will only see him as a childhood companion or “brother,” that she does not know his love, know his heart, and that she is oblivious to the fact that he is “above certain vile concerns.” Absence has made him see her as “the image of my reveries,” “the star of my destiny,” and also as a “sorceress.” But again he gives in to despair as he claims Julia will only see an abyss between them, one that he is willing to leap across. Then Carlos speculates about his mother's views: although she raised Julia as her own,

the haughty countess will see Julia as just a “poor mestiza.” The monologue ends with a return to the theme of madness, a madness that begins to plot his misfortune.

Tapia sets up one of the oppositions that will define the play: the tension between sense and non-sense, madness and reason, whim and will, which not only have a personal, but social, racial, and ethical dimensions as well. Carlos’s love for Julia is seen by his mother (the Countess) and even by Julia as crazy, irrational, and foolish. One of the most often used words in their arguments is *juicio*, which has rich associations in Spanish: sense, commonsense, judgment, sanity, discernment, and trial, in the strict legal sense. All of these meanings will crop up at different moments, during Carlos’s and Julia’s trials and tribulations. But Tapia constructs his play to help us reconsider and reverse the meanings of the terms as well, where, of course, *prejuicio* (prejudice, pre-judgment) plays an important role; and where the racial prejudices and fears of his mother, his future and imposed fiancée (Emilia), and father-in-law (Don Crispulo) are made to be seen as irrational, and mean-spirited. This is skillfully synthesized in a moment when Carlos, saying he will protect Julia, invokes the law, but quickly corrects himself and says justice: “La ley...digo mal: la justicia...” What seems “rational” as stated by the law is seen as unjust by those who oppose racism and slavery.

Despite his antipathy towards racism and his altruism, Carlos’s worldview is still class-bound and not entirely free of an implicit racial superiority. Indeed, Carlos’s whiteness is so ingrained, so “natural,” and so transparent that he can’t see how whiteness implies dominance, thereby letting him avoid asking some difficult questions. Carlos’s mother is a countess, but they belong to an aristocracy in ruins. We find out at the end of the Act I that a central reason for his mother’s interest in her son’s betrothal to Emilia is her father’s wealth. Because of their debts, their last sugar mill will be sold or auctioned off, and by marrying Don Crispulo’s daughter they can stave off financial ruin. Don Crispulo is a nouveau riche, and would benefit socially from his daughter marrying into the aristocracy.

Carlos’s aristocratic background is even belied in his early monologue mentioned earlier. He says he is “above certain vile concerns.” Those vile concerns are not only avarice, but social appearances, and racial prejudice. On several occasions he suggests to Julia that they go and live in another country, free of obsessions related to color and race. A true child of the Enlightenment, but imbued with the quintessential Romantic ethos, Carlos, is physically above the fray. Epistemologically he embraces the objectivity that stands outside the subject-object relationship, the value-free standpoint, the “view from nowhere.” By believing himself to be above the fray, he will clash with not only Julia, but those around him.

Julia reminds him that they are from two different worlds, especially in a country like Cuba (read Puerto Rico). She is much more grounded in seeing and living both racial and class difference. She has neither the physical mobility (class position) of Carlos, and epistemologically she embodies a situated knowledge, embedded in social, spatial, political, and historical relationships (Code 1993: 32–3). In opposition to Carlos, who often refers to Julia in celestial or incorporeal terms (star, angel, image, dream), Julia’s imagery is more concrete and spatial (abyss, body, country, and house are examples).

How does Julia see herself, her condition? Her words are telling, reflecting a knowledge of racial positioning embedded in a moral-religious discourse. “A stain [stigma] that must be very visible, because everyone sees it, everyone rubs it in my face. When everyone says it to me! ...And yet, this is not the stain of crime: I’ve had it since my first moment, I was born with it ...Ah! If I could only erase it! They say I’m beautiful...ha...ha...ha! How can I be with this stain? This is my original sin, but without redemption, without redemption!”

(Tapia 1993: 138). It would be difficult to find a more apt illustration of W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness... of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,” of the turmoil in living as “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois 1999: 11).

Julia’s words admirably capture Foucault’s term of bio-power, an intersection of the religious, sexual, and socio-racial gazes that underpin the visibility of power, as well as the power of visibility. Although Julia is free, unlike Jorge, who is still a slave, her existence is still severely circumscribed (her mother, a mulata, was a slave, her father white). It will eventually cost her her life.

This bio-power is synthesized in the figure of Don Crispulo. At the very end of the play Jorge, the slave, provides important information: Julia is the offspring of none other than Don Crispulo. Plotwise this might seem pat or predictable, but its effect is devastating: the social, economic, personal, and erotic dimensions of racism all converge on this character, thereby making Tapia’s critique multidimensional. Don Crispulo’s power (economic, male, and white) and desire have unleashed their destructiveness on Julia’s life, on Carlos’s dreams of happiness and Emilia’s independence, on the Condesa’s hopes for financial relief, and has even turned on his own yearning for social respectability.

The strength of Tapia’s play is in how it attacks slavery in its widest repercussions, since after all Julia (and not Jorge) is the pivotal character, along with Carlos, of course. Tapia’s critique overlaps with that of abolitionists like Segundo Ruiz Belvis, José Julián Acosta, and Francisco Mariano Quiñones, who outlined the ripple effects of slavery, of how it pervades a society even when most of its members are “free”:

What has slavery not corrupted in the societies of the Americas? In the realm of the material it has degraded work, a principle so crucial to realizing human potential; in the economic order, by converting men into property it has provoked the depreciation of all other property; in the civil order, by violating a slave’s personhood, by negating even the consolation of a family, it has created a corruption at the very core of privileged families; in the administrative order it has made omnipotent power necessary, indispensable, because wherever the rule of law has been sacrilegiously overturned, order cannot be created except out of the fear of those who suffer and the violence of those who rule; in the political order it has enthroned a state of affairs in which the energy of an individual is extinguished and the virility of character is almost impossible, because these great moral qualities need to breathe the air of freedom in order to live; in the social order, slavery has created a kind of aristocracy whose only tradition is skin color and whose power stems from wealth; and in the religious and moral order it has plunged that society into a passive existence without ideals and reduced it to a state of affairs based on injustice and iniquity.

[RUIZ BELVIS, ACOSTA, AND QUIÑONES AS QUOTED DÍAZ AUIÑONES (1985:49–50) — AUTHOR’S TRANSLATION]

Still, Tapia's play could be criticized for being too indirect, as well as somewhat fatalistic. Carlos indeed suffers, but unlike Julia he does not die. And while the last line of the play has the slave Jorge utter "God will deliver justice!", Tapia's reformism is what prevails, one that dovetails with a fairly common occurrence in Caribbean and U.S. literature of the nineteenth century: the tragic mulatta figure, most notably depicted in works like *Cecilia Valdó* (Villaverde) or *Clotel*, by William Wells Brown, a former slave. This tragic figure, ambiguous, was seen as the epitome of sensuality, a social climber, a symbol of the frustrations and aspirations of a racially divided society, and a visual reminder of miscegenation (not to mention an undercurrent of sexual violence). The mulatto, more often the mulatta, could be interpreted in either positive or negative ways: as a symbol of *mestizaje*, a new national subject, or as someone who combined the worst of both races, or in the best of cases as someone who was neither one thing (white) or another (black), a being who wavered in his/her search for self-definition.

A year after Tapia's play, on September 23, 1868, the Grito de Lares (Rallying Cry of Lares), a revolutionary insurrection, shook the island. Led by the revolutionary mulatto doctor, Ramón Emeterio Betances (1827–1898), it was based on the Ten Commandments of Free Men written by Betances a year before. The document called for the abolition of slavery (and the labor notebook system), the right to reject all taxes, freedom of speech, press, and commerce, the right to assemble and bear arms, the inviolability of the citizen, and the right to elect their own authorities. Despite the failure of the insurrection, it marked an important moment in forging a consciousness of nationhood on the island, as well as instigating local and foreign (Spanish) forces to formally abolish slavery by 1873, but only in Puerto Rico, not Cuba. Spain and its proslavery island allies did not act solely out of altruism: the sugar industry was suffering (production was shifting to tobacco and coffee), and wage labor was becoming more profitable and productive. But more important, they were trying to forestall a repeat of Cuba, embroiled in a Ten Years War (1868–1878) for abolition and independence that eventually cost more than a quarter of a million lives and more than \$300 million in economic damage. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, both political and literary discourses (sometimes, but not always constituted by the same elites) focused on issues of nationality and sovereignty.

Like many Caribbean societies, Puerto Rico has "defined blackness by negotiating degrees of whiteness" (Guerra 1998: 214). Although whiteness is still upheld as the norm, its definition is more inclusive than in the U.S. Typically in the Caribbean if you are not black you are white, whereas in North America it is the reverse. During the colonial era it was possible to be legally declared white through bureaucratic skill and/or money; however, it was by no means a smooth or always successful endeavor. None of this implies an absence of racism or prejudice, but with roughly half the population being white and another 40 percent considered to be of mixed blood (which, of course, includes degrees of white blood), it is not difficult to see how "negotiating degrees of whiteness" could become a complex ensemble of social, racial, and cultural maneuverings. Thus, in Puerto Rico miscegenation was ultimately seen as a whitening of the black and brown population, and not the opposite. It should not be forgotten that by the end of the nineteenth century (1898), only twenty-five years had elapsed since the abolition of slavery. To tout one's African ancestry was for many to evoke a past of humiliation and shame.

Hispanophilia and mulata on display, or How to wiggle your flag in search of the lost m(other)

In 1898 Puerto Rico became a U.S. colony when the Spanish-Cuban-American War ended. Puerto Ricans quickly became aware of U.S. racial attitudes, which they found harsh and polarized. Yet at the same time the size and dynamism of the U.S. economy provided jobs to many dark-skinned Puerto Ricans, either on the island or to those who emigrated. Under the U.S., Puerto Rico's sugar economy expanded again, with absentee owners buying the land of many small local producers. The U.S. had not satisfactorily resolved issues of autonomy and citizenship, a failing that was deeply resented by Puerto Ricans. Finally, the U.S. unilaterally imposed citizenship in the 1917 Jones Act. But resentment did not recede since governors (the supreme executive official) were still picked by the U.S., and English was imposed as the official language in the school system. Successfully resisted, English was eventually eliminated in 1930, and represents an important example of Puerto Rican linguistic and cultural sovereignty in resisting U.S. colonialism. This resentment flared up during WWI, when Puerto Ricans who considered themselves white within the broader island definition of race were placed in segregated Negro units of the U.S. army. To many Puerto Ricans this was an outrage; the U.S. solution was to create a "Puerto Rican white" category, viewed by many islanders as unsatisfactory.

Even a revolutionary nationalist like Pedro Albizu Campos (1891–1965), jailed several times for his views and actions calling for the violent overthrow of the island's colonial system, did not give racial issues their due. Albizu, in a famous speech from October 12, 1933, speaks proudly of the fact that he had black blood (as well as Indian and Spanish) in his veins and vehemently criticized the racial realities of the U.S. as being barbaric (Albizu Campos 1972: 191–218). However, he ultimately saw race as divisive to his political goals and subsumed race under the overarching concept of Puerto Rican culture. Albizu shared a point in common with intellectuals of the Thirties Generation, such as Tomás Blanco (1900–1975) and Antonio S. Pedreira (1899–1939): in trying to counteract U.S. cultural and ideological influence in Puerto Rico, they fell back on an acritical and ahistorical Hispanophilia, which had a strong racial (and anti-black) undercurrent.³

One of the few intellectuals who resisted that Hispanophilia was poet Luis Palés Matos (1898–1959). Palés was born in Guayama, an area historically populated by Puerto Ricans of African descent. Although his poetry was thematically wide-ranging, it is his Afro-Antillean poetry that earned his fame, particularly his *Tuntún de pasa y griferón* [Kinky-haired and carousing drum beat], written between 1925 and 1937. Intensely rhythmic, onomatopoeic, playful, and sensual, Palés's poetry explored the cultural, religious, historical, and sexual dimensions of Puerto Rico's African identity. For the first time a publicly known figure not only pointed out but celebrated African contributions to the island's language, music, food, sports, and social behavior. Reworking a phrase by Jung, Palés stated in an interview: "...[T]he Antillean is a Spaniard with the mores and ethos of a mulatto and the soul of a black" (Palés Matos 1978: 216). Anticipating a heated response, Palés ends by saying, "This definition will no doubt cause an uproar among many. But neither Spaniard nor black will protest it" (Palés Matos 1978: 216). Despite the bold phrase, Palés's words belie a Eurocentric bias: why is the Antillean (read Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican) a Spaniard with mores and moves of a mulatto and not the other way?

Nowadays, it is difficult to imagine how "scandalous" *Tuntún de pasa y griferón* was when it was first published, notwithstanding the positive reviews from the likes of

Tomás Blanco, Federico de Onís, and Margot Arce. Actually, Pales's *poemas negros* were being criticized since at least 1932, and the criticisms ranged from exoticism, primitivism, and romanticism, to stereotyping and evasion. Other readings, contextualized (Díaz Quiñones) or post-modern and Lacanian (Ríos Avila), evoke a more complex, ironic, carnivalesque, destabilizing Palés.⁴ Even accepting the important insights of a postmodern reading, there are moments (and not only a few) in his poetry where the irony or the implied reversal of stereotypes continue to reinforce black stereotypes. Still, Palés's Afro-Antillean verses are complex; to dismiss them entirely would be to lose sight of their critical edge. However, to claim that his irony freed him from racist stereotypes would be naïve, even allowing for the mitigating circumstances of the time. After all, the likes of Nicolás Guillén, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and others of the Harlem Renaissance were writing with a *negrista* ethos that avoided or openly combated such stereotypes.

To those who define patriotism platonically (and white-hued), Palés irreverently conjoined nationalism with eroticism, also unequivocally stating that *mulatez* was positive. Following Žižek, one could say that enjoyment is at the heart (or gut) of the Palesian ethos, and that enjoyment is something that both resists symbolic identification, and is beyond the pleasure principle (Žižek 1993: 201, 280ff). Of course Palés offers a symbolic identification with the island's (at that point) long ignored African-ness; but at the same time he seems to draw a more radical conclusion: that the national being includes the Other (blackness), and not only as a social-racial construct, but both as national pleasure and enjoyment (jouissance).

Palés's overturns the issue of national identity as being abstract, idealistic not only politically but philosophically as well, in that his poetry implies a materialistic, corporeal, and visceral outlook. Yet, at the same time Pales's Afro-Antillean world is highly mythologized, emblematic, and nonrealistic. Again, the Lacanian notions of the Real (the Thing) seem to impinge on Pales's notion of race, its ideological performativity.

For Lacan, the concept of the Thing (*das Ding*) is the lost object of desire, unattainable, forbidden, the return of the repressed. The Real is considered what is incapable of being incorporated into the symbolic order (not only family and society, but into a chain of meanings). In resisting symbolization it contains something traumatic about it, the Real is fraught with nonsignification and danger. However, human subjects unavoidably try and give expression of the Real through language (the Symbolic) and through image, wholeness, and similarity (the Imaginary). The Real has a material, or physical connotation, including objective, external reality, but also includes more mental or ethereal dimensions: hallucinations and traumatic dreams (Evans 1996: 160). It is both interior and exterior, and deeply embedded within the ideological realm:

Althusser speaks only of the ideological through which the symbolic machine of ideology is 'internalized' into the ideological experience of Meaning and Truth: but...this 'internalization', by structural necessity, never fully succeeds, there is a residue, a leftover, stain of traumatic irrationality and senselessness sticking to it [the Real, the Thing-A.W.D.], and that *this leftover, far from hindering the full submission of the subject to the ideological command, is the very condition of it:*

it is precisely this non-integrated surplus of senseless traumatism which confers on the Law its unconditional authority: in other words, which —in so far as it escapes ideological sense— sustains what we might call the ideological *jouis-sense*, enjoyment-in-sense (enjoy-meant), proper to ideology [ŽIŽEK 1989: 43–4].

Palés captures beautifully this double dimension of what can't be articulated and the enjoyment-in-sense of ideology in a poem like "Mulata-Antilla." The beginning stanzas are an erotic-celebratory (albeit sexist) reconstruction of the mulata. In the first stanza, Palés makes one of his most common associations of the mulata with honey (miel o melaza), as well as using marine imagery (associations with Venus). In the second, the author likens himself to a boat traversing the mulata-antilla's curves (or coast lines). In the third music is evoked along with the smells of the islands: lime, tobacco, and pineapple. The fourth stanza is both a summing up and a transition that again evokes not only fruit and song, but also the presence of tourists. The fifth lovingly links the joining of two races (African and European), celebrating *mestizaje*, and then spawns a series of analogies between the mulata and the biblical Song of Songs. The final stanza invokes several of the Caribbean islands "...all united/ dreaming, suffering, and struggling/against plagues, cyclones, and greed" and ends with a metaphor of the mulata as "freedom singing in my Antilles" (Palés Matos 1978: 173).

Much has been written about the image of the mulata in Caribbean literature, popular music and culture, rightly criticizing its sexism and racism.⁵ For some critics, *mestizaje* or *mulatez* have been used as symbols of racial democracy in all of Latin America, often to sidestep or deny the existence of racism. Here Palés is treading on thin, and, ultimately, indefensible ground. This can be seen in the use of nature (earth, sea, cyclones, flowers), food (milk, honey, sugar, coconut, etc.), and animal imagery (cats, horses), all used to enhance the mulata's sensuality, "tastiness," and sexuality. Even when Pales in the fourth stanza ostensibly uses the word *catinga* (a word to denote the strong, read negative odor of either indigenous people or Africans) in a positive sense, one cannot help but wonder if he is not resurrecting racial stereotypes. So, despite Pales's analogy of the mulata and freedom, the mulata as sexual object, as personified in the quote by Gilberto Freyre, "la negra para trabajar; la mulata para fornicar, la blanca para casar" (black women are [good] for slaving and sweating; mulattas for bedding; white women for wedding) is still present in the poem, although it does not exhaust the poem's meaning. Indeed, the mulata-islands who are as one "dreaming, suffering, and striving/against plagues, hurricanes and greed" become the "freedom singing in the Antilles" (Palés Matos 1978: 173). This ending is a remarkable transformation, since until then the poem had restrained from any mention of freedom and liberation.⁶

Palés mocks white fears of the racial Other through sexuality, biblical references, and an analogy to freedom, and ultimately says the "Other" is us. And yet the sexualization and carnivalization of that fear seem to indicate that there is a social, cultural, and even spatial distance as well. Pales seems to exemplify Bauman's anthropo-*phagic* and anthropo-*emic* strategies of dealing with strangers or the other. The first implies being inclusivist, an assimilation, a "devouring," making the stranger a neighbor. The *emic* expels and excludes, makes the other aliens. Here we can see issues of race and immigration intertwine, how the polarities of us and them,

the foreign and the homegrown, are constructed. Both are needed for domination of the social space, as a way of giving hope (but not too much) to these strangers. These conflicting and complementary strategies, however, can lead to what Bauman also terms proteophobia, defined as “...the presence of multiform, allotropic phenomena, which stubbornly elide assignment and sap the familiar classificatory grids.... Proteophobia refers to the dislike of situations in which one feels lost, confused, or disempowered” (Bauman 1995: 180–1). Isn’t mulatez a racial, national, cultural kind of proteophobia? No small wonder why Stuart Hall says race is a “floating signifier” or Isar Godreau speaks of racial terminology as a “*semántica fugitiva*” or fugitive semantics (I would suggest a *semántica cimarrona* maroon semantics).⁷ Palés’s poetry tries to engage in a kind of maroon semantics by giving old expressions surprising and new possibilities of meaning; his use of irony, which always borders on self-parody, suggests that proteophobia can be an opportunity to reshape national identity for new purposes, an identity that is not elitist, nor paternalistic, Hispanophile, nor concerned with racial purity.

The Puerto Rican (or Caribbean) social fantasy of the mulata is part of a cultural memory (different from merely personal memory or history). It is a field of disputed signs in national consciousness—especially when it deals with traumatic events—and where the continuities and ruptures of a society are revealed (see Sturken 1997: 1–17). A fantasy is the staging of an unconscious desire: as a result, we have compromise formations, where the idea or trauma to be expressed is distorted and unrecognizable, and these formations try to smooth over the gaps in the Real. The realm of the Lacanian Real, that which resists symbolization, is present, but disguised. The mulata is both the hyperactivity of that symbolic mode trying to dress (or is it undress?) the gaps in the Real that will not go away.

The mulata fantasy is utopian because it wants to present her as national symbol, as an emblem of conciliation, a visual token that ignores all the symptoms of a divided society (race, class, and gender). However, there is instability in her meaning, in her image. Her eroticization presents a dilemma by confusing pleasure (located on her body) and desire (atopic, proliferative), between pleasure and enjoyment (*jouissance*). Pleasure is “related to prohibition, to the law, and to regulation, it is clearly on the side of the symbolic” (Evans 1996: 148). Pleasure tries to maintain a low level of tension of the psychic apparatus. *Jouissance* is disruptive, traumatic, and tries to break through the pleasure principle, toward an enjoyment of the Other.

Something similar happens racially: in not embracing blackness (*jouissance*) completely, a more whitened (pleasure) version of blackness is presented: mulatez (pleasure masquerading as enjoyment). Mulatez is a way of keeping enjoyment under the law, under the pleasure principle, under Whiteness. And yet mulatez is always a reminder of how pleasure gave way to *jouissance*, of the Other, of the presence of trauma (miscegenation as rape), of the return of the wound that we have refused to heal. (It’s germane to recall that in Puerto Rico miscegenation is viewed as a whitening process.)

The compromise formation evades or circles the trauma of slavery, oppression, sexual violence, and turns it into an emblem of pleasure. By representing the pleasure of being a nation, the mulata embodies the nation (in all senses), and mediates between the bio-natural realm (racial mixing), the collective sublime (nationhood), the religious (Spiritualism, the orishas Oshún-Yemayá), the musical (*bomba*, *plena*), the cultural (a transcultured-hybrid society), and even the culinary (*sancocho*). To criticize and deconstruct the mulata myth (as classist, sexist, racist) will not necessarily dislodge her from the island’s cultural memory; she inhabits the realm of

pleasure and enjoyment, but just as significantly she belongs to the Symbolic (as explanatory myth), to the Imaginary (as utopian fantasy of reconciliation), and to the Real (as trauma, as historical and sexual violence), as well as to a transcultured and often bloody history and to the return of the repressed.

The nation, which often trumps race in the Caribbean, demonstrates these same traits, and Žižek shows how the race and nation become intertwined in defining national enjoyment:

Nationalism thus presents a privileged domain of enjoyment into the social field. The national Cause is ultimately nothing but the way subjects of a given ethnic community organize their enjoyment through national myths. What is therefore at stake in ethnic tensions is always the possession of the national Thing. We always impute to the ‘other’ an excessive enjoyment: he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment. In short, what really bothers us about the ‘other’ is the peculiar way he organizes his enjoyment, precisely the surplus, the ‘excess’ that pertains to this way: the smell of ‘their’ food, ‘their’ noisy songs and dances, ‘their’ strange manners, ‘their’ attitude to work. To the racist, the ‘other’ is either a workaholic stealing our jobs, or an idler living on our labor, and it is quite amusing to notice the haste with which one passes from reproaching the other with a refusal to work to reproaching him for the theft of work. The basic paradox is that our Thing is conceived as something inaccessible to the other and at the same time threatened by him [1993: 202–3].

Revenge of the mulatas: Patriarchy’s myths exposed

Rosario Ferré’s *Maldito amor* (1986 — *Sweet Diamond Dust*, 1996) examines both the gender, sexual, and racial underpinnings of this national enjoyment. Ostensibly the story of a great national (and local) hero, don Ubaldino, as told by a narrator, Don Hermenegildo Martínez (the town notary and lawyer), Ferré overturns the narrative with successive revelations by the women characters (Titina, Laura, Gloria), ultimately debunking the “founding father.” Gloria Campubrí is a “traffic-stopping” mulata nurse brought to the De la Valle plantation to care for the aged and dying Ubaldino. One son, Aristedes, carries on an affair with her, and wants to marry her, but his mother (Laura) prohibits their union, and instead marries Gloria off to her other son Nicolás, whom the brother claims is gay. The plan was that after Ubaldino died, the marriage would be annulled, and Gloria would leave, “with proper compensation.” But Nicolás, after getting Gloria pregnant, dies in a suspicious accident six months after the wedding. Gloria leaves, and eventually becomes a prostitute in the bars of Guamaní, the mythical town recreated by Ferré in this short novel.

Though Ferré’s narrative focuses heavily on patriarchy and gender inequalities (and to a lesser degree homophobia), the racial dimensions are not lost on the reader.

Again, there is a mulata figure who disrupts the racial, sexual, and social tranquility of an elite family, obsessed with their pedigree and social standing, as well as their economic power, which has been threatened by U.S. firms who are gobbling up land and sugar refineries as the new colonial power on the island. One of the interesting details revealed late in the novel by Laura is that the grandfather of her children was also black. The so-called “purity” and “reputation” of the family was a myth, and its final debunking (which ends the novel) encompasses the words of Gloria herself, speaking to Titina Rivera, the daughter of a freed slave. She and her brother Nestor had lived in a little house in the backyard of the family home, and they had hoped to inherit it after living there for forty years. Ubaldino has died, but his children, Arístedes and his sisters, will not let them inherit the little house either. It is a stinging finale about pernicious racism, all the more poignant since it ends with the words to “Maldito Amor” by the mulatto composer Juan Morel Campos, the island’s greatest composer of the nineteenth century. Ferré takes on the “tragic mulata figure” head on, and although she has suffered greatly at the hands of the de la Valle family, her “authorial voice” at the end of the narrative (as well as doña Laura’s wish for her to be the sole inheritor of the family), ultimately shifts the his/her-story being told. Gender-wise and racially, Ferré seems to suggest that Caribbean national narratives, instead of focusing on “founding fathers,” need to tell the story of its vast majorities: the mulatos *and mulatas*, the daughters and sons.

The Puerto Rican danza, like its Cuban counterpart the danzón, is considered an archetypical image of cultural mulataje, a harmonious synthesis of European and African musical forms. The island’s national anthem is a *danza* (written by Félix Astol, lyrics were added later by Manuel Fernández Juncos), and the mulata’s virtues are extolled in decidedly gendered form: a flowery garden, placid murmurings of the waves, being the daughter of the sun and the sea. Ferré’s narrative suggests that the emblematic form of the danza, for many decades the national musical form and a symbol of Euro-African reconciliation, did not quite reflect the social realities of a racially divided country faced with the incipient imperial presence of the U.S. It also foreshadows the concerns expressed in *El entierro de Cortijo* (discussed later), and the rise of musical genres that are more Afro-Puerto Rican (bomba, plena, salsa).

Whitening and racial self-perception: Mulattoes and blacks disappear

At the beginning of the twentieth century Puerto Rico still perceived itself as whitening. In the 1899 census the figures are as follows: 62 percent white, 32 percent mulatto, 6 percent black. In 1910 the figures are 65 percent white, 30 percent mulatto, 5 percent black. Ten years later (1920) it is 73 percent white, 23.5 percent mulatto, and 3.5 percent black. In 1930, where no differentiation between mulatto and black is reported, we see the following: 74 percent white and 26 percent colored. By 1950, 80 percent of Puerto Ricans identified themselves as white (Guerra 1998: 220–1). As scholars have noted, this shift cannot be explained by an influx of foreign-born white immigrants, since between 1900 and 1930 this figure decreased by more than 40 percent!!! Perceptually, Puerto Ricans who saw themselves as mulattoes at one point became whites, and those who previously identified themselves as blacks became mulattoes. Such perceptions have been emphatically questioned. An established Caribbean scholar, Franklin Knight, lists the 1985 population of the island as 80 percent non-white. Another study from the late eighties of Puerto Ricans in New York yields a figure of 67 percent non-white (60 percent as tan, 7 percent as black) and 33 percent white (Rodríguez 1989).

These contrasting perceptions reflect the radically different worlds of racial categorization used as reference points by U.S. observers compared to Puerto Rican subjectivity. In Puerto Rico’s own racial history under Spanish colonialism, miscegenation was viewed as a whitening, not a darkening process. Also, Puerto Ricans continued to resist the imposition of U.S. racial classifications. Indeed, many dark-skinned Puerto Ricans were often identified as African-Americans, a label they rejected not only for racial reasons, but also out of nationalism and culture. It is not that Puerto Ricans are not race conscious, but cultural belonging supersedes it, a common enough attitude throughout the Caribbean. Moreover, the uniqueness of the island’s history often makes racial self-definition an expression of resistance to U.S. colonialism. Puerto Ricans in the U.S., when asked what they are, respond that they are Puerto Ricans, not black or white. Sociologist Clara Rodríguez states the dilemma as follows: “Within the U.S. perspective, Puerto Ricans, racially speaking, belonged to both groups; however, ethnically, they belonged to neither. Thus placed, Puerto Ricans soon found themselves caught between two polarities and dialectically at a distance from both. Puerto Ricans were White and Black; Puerto Ricans were neither White nor Black. From the Puerto Rican perspective, Puerto Ricans were more than White and Black” (1989: 51). Rodríguez tries to explain race attitudes on the island with a family example: an interracial couple has two children, one Anglo-looking, the other dark skinned. Both go to the same school. One is considered white, the other *trigueño oscuro* (dark brown); in the U.S. both children would be considered black.

These complexities are eloquently described in Piri Thomas’s celebrated *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) or in Tato Laviera’s poem “Negrito.” Interestingly, many black and mulatto Puerto Rican writers born or raised from infancy in the U.S. have taken on issues of race in their literature: aside from Thomas and Laviera, there is Nicholasa Mohr, Ed Vega, Louis Reyes Rivera, Esmeralda Santiago, and Jack Agüeros. The shocking experience of moving through two worlds of race—one nuanced and complex, the other cruelly absolute—stimulates a struggle often expressed through art or political activism.

In Laviera’s “Negrito,” a young, dark-skinned Puerto Rican boy has just moved to New York and converses with his aunt. The aunt tells him “No te juntes con los prietos, negrito” (Don’t hang out with black folks, negrito) (Laviera 1985: 41). He says to his aunt that he is as dark as the black folks she has warned him about. She keeps insisting on his whiteness, which only brings on sadness and confusion to the young boy. Laviera, who admits the poem is autobiographical, keenly underlines the different perceptions of race between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, beginning with the title of the poem. “Negrito” can literally refer to a small black boy, who is the subject of the poem. But *negrito* and *negrita* have other connotations as well: they can be expressions of affection to a friend, family member, or loved one, regardless of their race. Pedro Pietri in *Puerto Rican Obituary* says it means honey. So the young boy’s aunt is also using a term of affection as well, understandable with a family member. But her trying to explain the U.S. color line underscores two things. First, she is trying to enforce the Puerto Rican insistence on cultural and national identity over racial identity. Second, although her nephew is phenotypically similar to African-Americans, she is aware of what being black means in the U.S. as compared to Puerto Rico. Not surprisingly, the young boy of the poem is perplexed: “new york waved hi/and said to him ‘confusion’” (Laviera 1985: 41).

In situating himself between two worlds Laviera’s poem not only expresses the confusion and disappointment of the young boy in the poem, but also a coming to

awareness of his Afro-Puerto Rican heritage. (Curiously the two worlds are not echoed linguistically, and unlike many of his poems, “Negrito” is entirely in Spanish.) Laviera, instead of heeding the aunt’s words, has chosen to affirm his Afroboricua heritage (and its links to a greater Afrodiasporic dialogue), be it through the use of certain rhythmic structures, themes, or drawing on street vernaculars. In an interview, Laviera admits that half of his poetry readings are for black constituencies (Hernández 1997: 81).

The fact that many Puerto Ricans are living in places like New York, in close physical proximity with African-Americans and other peoples from the Caribbean, has resulted in drawing boricuas into the orbit of other African-based cultures. In dress and language, many Puerto Ricans show the influences of U.S. African-Americans and many identify with hip-hop culture. There are Puerto Rican rappers (like Big Pun, Rick Rodríguez, Anthony Boston, Charlie Chase, Tony Touch, Angie Martínez) who sing in English and/or Spanish, and many others who are graffiti artists, like the legendary Lee Quiñones. This does not include the extraordinary boricua presence in the evolution of break dancing (Rock Steady Crew, The Furious Rockers, The New York City Breakers and others). This intercultural effervescence is happening on the island as well, with rappers such as Vico C, Lisa M, Francheska, Ruben DJ, Welmo, and Tego Calderón.⁸ What is particularly interesting about island rappers is that they invoke and celebrate island culture, but no longer buy into the portrait of Puerto Rico as a big, happy multiracial family (Calderón 2002).⁹

Cortijo, salsa, and afroboricua pride: Mulattoes own the streets

Since the 1960s there has been greater awareness and debate of racial issues, and increasing pride in being *Afroboricua* (Afro-Puerto Rican). The new self-esteem came through music, not literature. One of the turning points in that new consciousness was the work of bandleader Rafael Cortijo (1928–1982) and singer Ismael Rivera (1931–1987), who teamed up in the mid-fifties to create some of the island’s greatest music, based on the traditions of bomba and plena, both Afro-Puerto Rican musical traditions. Cortijo’s sound became known internationally, just as before him the songs of Rafael Hernández (1893–1965) were greatly admired throughout all Latin America and the Caribbean. (One could argue that Rivera’s version of Tite Curet Alonso’s “Mi gente negra” did more for shaping a positive image of Afroboricua pride than all of Pales Matos’s poems.) Cortijo’s music (along with Afro-Cuban musical traditions) formed the basis of salsa, a hybrid genre that grew out of the urban experience of many Afro-Puerto Ricans in New York City and dealt with themes of poverty, racism, social violence, education, and drugs. It was equally a period of great community mobilizations, the creation of the Young Lords, and the Nuyorican Poets Café. The experience of American-style racism gave many boricuas a new sense of their Afroboricua roots, which had they stayed on the island might have taken more time to coalesce.

All these issues suffuse *El entierro de Cortijo* (1983) by Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, a highly charged, humorous, hard-hitting chronicle of Cortijo’s funeral, which took place on November 6, 1982. Held at the Luis Lloréns Torres housing project, the chronicle plays with the notion of death as the great equalizer that cuts through all the divisions (class, race, gender) within Puerto Rican society. Although a thorough analysis of this book is not possible here, there are some points worth mentioning.

Rodríguez Juliá’s chronicle reflects the shift in Puerto Rican popular culture towards Afro-Puerto Rican and working class expressions, notably analyzed by the likes of Juan Flores, José Luis González, Ángel Quintero Rivera, and Jorge Duany in

the seventies and eighties and a host of scholars since the nineties (Frances Aparicio, Ruth Glasser, Edgardo Díaz Díaz).

In part this reflects the importance of two authors who polemically brought issues of race to the forefront: Isabelo Zenón Cruz (1939–2002) and José Luis González (1926–1996). Zenón’s exhaustive 1974 two-volume study, *Narciso descubre su trasero* [Narcissus Discovers his Backside], is subtitled “The Black in Puerto Rican Culture.” Although the author draws heavily on literature and the arts, Zenón’s book includes much historical, political, and educational material, even government reports. His work was controversial because it attacked much of the hypocrisy around race on the island, drawing on unexamined assumptions from popular culture, such as jokes, sayings, and proverbs, to prove his point. Zenón spares no one in his meticulously documented study.

González’s 1979 essay was first published in Puerto Rico in 1980. Although the “Four Storeyed-Country” has been criticized both for what it says (or does not say), the essay brought the discussion of the country’s African roots to the fore.¹⁰ Most importantly, after Zenón and González, it was impossible for intellectuals, historians, and literary scholars to ignore racism and its insidious consequences.

Secondly, *El entierro de Cortijo* shows how racial discrimination is now indirectly expressed through concern about crime. The author, from the beginning, shows apprehension, knowing that he is a middle-class and white, in a neighborhood where most are dark-skinned and poor. He even mentions a street that divides Lloréns Torres (described as lumpen) from the next neighborhood, Villa Palmeras, which is working-class and also the site where the chronicle ends. The crime is real enough (the island has high murder and armed robbery figures), but it has been racialized, with black and darker-skinned mulattoes suffering the brunt of arrests, even though the police do not keep statistics on race (Santiago-Valles 1995).

To his credit, Rodríguez Juliá never claims to be merely an observer, but acknowledges that he is situated socially and racially, although he clearly is an “outsider” in that particular neighborhood. This is perfectly summed up when he mentions the act of recreating this event through the written word:

Dark-skinned folks, dark-skinned folks all round and all I have is a Mont Blanc to write with....No, that eighteenth century craft of the chronicler forbids it: not even a notebook, a tape recorder, not even a Minox camera. I prefer to write the chronicle passing it before my eyes and ears, I’m stubbornly underdeveloped [...] The chronicler’s filter is memory, personal and collective, and also one’s prejudices, why not? You try and save what can be saved between the lived moment and the written chronicle. You lose almost everything, for sure, but the images remain, the most persistent details, those that cannot relinquish remembrance despite the treacheries of memory....

[RODRÍGUEZ JULIÁ 1983: 17 — AUTHOR’S TRANSLATION].

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Rodríguez Juliá’s chronicle is his capture of the ever inventive and multiform colloquial Spanish spoken in Puerto Rico. Through certain words or verbal rhythms, the author reveals an extremely complex portrait of Puerto Rico, especially issues of race, class, and gender.

Since he is a writer and not a sociologist or politician, Rodríguez Juliá offers no neat, tidy, and consoling summations. He debunks the patriarchal myth of the great Puerto Rican family, constantly invoked by politicians and pundits; and shows how the old class order is being overturned, exemplified in how the burial turns into a street party, to the alarm of some. Although he knows the old ways were often repugnantly racist and classist, the emerging situation can be confusing, disruptive, and disorienting, reminding one of Bauman's *proteophobia*. Not surprisingly, the book ends with the following: "Again, we are living in a time of ghostly intentions and unburied gestures, tradition explodes in a thousand conflictive pieces. How to reconcile so much waywardness with so much tenderness?" (Rodríguez Juliá 1983: 96 — author's translation).

Rodríguez Juliá's crónica, despite the obvious focus on Cortijo's life and work, seems to have as a historical soundtrack two landmark songs, one Puerto Rican, another Cuban. Both songs are steeped in Afro-Caribbean working class culture: "Los entierros de mi gente pobre" by Tite Curet Alonso (made famous by singer Cheo Feliciano) and "Los funerales del Papá Montero" by Enrique Byron and Manuel Corona. The first, written by the recently deceased great Afro-Puerto Rican composer, Rodríguez Juliá, seems to have appropriated the spirit, authenticity, and humility of lower class life in the island, where funerals are genuine outpourings of grief thankfully bereft of hypocrisy. In the latter, we find the kind of raucous and irreverent humor from the guaracha tradition that can turn even a funeral into a celebration.

But even more remarkably, Rodríguez Juliá's book seems to exemplify central tenets of Yoruba philosophy, where character, coolness, and beauty are intimately intertwined within a context of post-WWII social mobility, and later post-muñocista Puerto Rico. This might seem a contradictory assertion given the excessive, almost chaotic denouement of the funeral, but the deeper forces brought to the fore are those that emphasize generosity and the surfacing of a beauty that is neither too beautiful nor too ugly, of capturing a certain *ad* that suffuses the text between the lines (Thompson 1993: 3–18).

Black and proud: In your face (and nose)

Mayra Santos Febre, a fiction writer, helped form the Union of Afro-Puerto Rican Women along with Ana Rivera, Rayda Cotto, Celia M. Romano, and Marie Ramos Rosado. Her book *Pez de vidrio* won the 1994 Letras de Oro award, and was published in Puerto Rico in 1996. One story from this book, "Marina y su olor" [Marina and her odors], openly confronts a racist stereotype with humor and poetic flair.

Marina, now forty-nine years old, narrates her experiences growing up. The story focuses on Marina's odors in a kind of fairy tale of retribution. As a girl she helps out by cooking in her parents' small eatery. From eight to thirteen her smells were "spicy, salty, and sweet." At thirteen she began to smell like the sea; her fragrances began to attract and bewitch the male customers. Concerned, her mother sends her as cook and servant to a family, under the watchful eye of Georgina Velázquez, described as "white, pious, and a vulgar rich person." First, she began to conjure up food smells as she would mentally prepare menus for the next day, but eventually she began to experiment with the smells of emotions (sadness, solitude, desire). Marina rebuffs the advances of Hipólito, Georgina's son, who would spend his nights bedding young mulatas, enamored of dark flesh. At age fifteen Marina begins to take notice of boys and falls in love with Eladio Salamán, who is black like her. But both Georgina and her parents find out and she is kept from seeing him. Georgina insults her, saying "You're a bad woman,

a slut, indecent, a stinking black, you stink!" (Santos Febres 1996: 48). One day, using her ability to create smells and gauging the direction of the wind, she is able to bring Eladio to her, and they begin kissing each other joyfully. Her bliss is short-lived since she is discovered by Hipólito. He offers not to tell her employer if he can suck her breasts. Marina becomes so incensed that she gives off a powerful smell that literally knocks Hipólito out. Then she proceeds to deal with Georgina, "fumigating her room with an aroma of desperate melancholy (which she had picked up from her father)" (Santos Febres: 50). The rest of the house was left with an odor so disorienting that no one in the town ever visited the Velázquez house again. Triumphant, Marina leaves the house uttering: "There! So you can now say that blacks stink!" (Santos Febres 1996: 50).

Santos Febres has taken a persistent racist stereotype about smell and turned it around, almost as if to say "You want to raise a stink? I'll show what raising a stink is!" Of all the five senses, smell is seen as the lowliest, the most "animal." Sniffing is an activity we associate with animals (dogs, cats). This animality is also linked to racist stereotypes of lack of intelligence, hyper-sexuality, and moral turpitude. Rodríguez Juliá, in his *El entierro de Cortijo*, talks about a characteristic island trait, *busmeaar*. Literally, of course, it means to sniff, but in a more social context it means to size up, find out things, to be curious in an almost gossipy way. Santos Febres seems to be *busmeando* into the heart of racial attitudes on the island, echoing, perhaps, Fernando Ortiz's etymological investigations into the word race (*raza*). Ortiz said, quoting Unamuno, that the word was first used in cattle breeding:

This now ominous word race is of Spanish origin, and an analogous expression is caste. And since those words were first used in cattle-breeding, they still have an animal-like flavor to them. Racist conceptions tend to be zoologically conceptual, that is when they are not zotechnical or related to cattle-breeding. Racists, whether they want to or not, knowingly or unknowingly, consider peoples as flocks, generally as sheep to be fleeced [1975: 390].

Marina is able to take that "animalness" and make it a weapon of self-defense. Odor is linked to notions of power as when expressed in phrases like "the lower classes don't wash, they smell," or Thomas Jefferson's remark that "blacks have a strong, disagreeable odor," or male jokes about women's genitalia. All these notions of odor undergird sexism, racism, and classism. In Marina's case, her odors have a symbolic resonance with class, race, and gender (Synnott 1993: 194–9).

Odor also has strong moral connotations as well. Witness how we describe suspicious, illegal or immoral behavior in terms of words and phrases such as "foul," "it stinks," and "it's fishy." The story begins with the sexual connotations of odor, then goes on to link it to food, and, later, the emotions. Only at the end do we see Marina's odors fighting against racism and advancing her autonomy as a woman. The emotional link is crucial. It is her love for Eladio that sets off positive emotions, and equally affects the way she cooks (and smells). When she is prohibited from seeing Eladio her sadness makes the food taste different (shrimps taste like pork chops) or is negative (they all throw up). At the end of the story, the smells take on an ethical dimension: they ensure she does not suffer from the predatory sexuality of Hipólito,

or the racism (with class and gender overtones) of Georgina. Marina's fumigating refusal has the whiff of justice: she escapes the house, and the lingering odors keep away visitors (the family has been isolated from the community).

Santos Febres's story illustrates perfectly the theft of enjoyment from the previous Zizek quote on nationalism and racism. Georgina clearly saw Marina in terms of that excess of enjoyment: her smells (body and food), her sexuality, her autonomy as human and social subject. She was punished for that: she was prohibited from seeing Eladio, and her salary was cut. These events make the ending all the more gratifying and ironic: if previously Georgina had made Marina into the "other" (racially, socially, sexually), it is now Georgina who will be the "other" (shunned by her community).

Conclusion: Still conflicted, still struggling

Though Puerto Rico has long been called a racial democracy, the whitest of the Spanish-speaking islands, a country free of prejudice, these claims are no longer voiced with the same self-assuredness as before. Even its best minds have found race an elusive topic, but as the previous literary examples discussed show, many of these myths are unsustainable and are being debunked or confronted by its artists, writers, and musicians.

Although the new racial awareness of the last decades has been transformative and has revealed a greater complexity in defining national (and racial) identity, the political and economic elites of the country are still mostly white or light-skinned mulattoes. Puerto Rico's racial dynamics show both great nuance and fluidity, and at the same time a certain avoidance or denial. The major political and social issues still are expressed in terms of either nation (political status) or class (economic opportunity) or education (social mobility) or negotiation of public space (crime). Despite pervasive and subtle forms of racial prejudice and discrimination, the country is ever more aware of its changing and evolving Afro-Caribbean identity and culture, which it also increasingly celebrates. Its writers, artists, musicians, and rappers are in the forefront of both the critique of racism and the celebration of the island's Afroboricua roots. But the more subtle forms of discrimination, much like what happens in the U.S., are still pervasive (limited access to housing, poor educational opportunities, limited bank loans, poorer health); the racial self-perception is increasingly whitened, and then there is the persistence of the myth of the mestizaje. All these factors point to the fact that Puerto Rico still needs to examine its racial inequities with greater insight, creativity, and honesty. Tego Calderón (2002) reminds us of the challenge:

Yo no tengo na' sólo esta letra encabroná y la capacidad de no creer en tu verdad. [...] Se dice que las cosas han cambaido no te duermas...los anormales andan con palos.	Don't gotta thing Just these words of goddam rage and the capacity to not believe in your truth. [...] People say things have changed Careful!...those who are really sick Carry a large wooden stick.
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NOTES

- ¹ See the excellent introductory essay by Arcadio Díaz Quiñones (1985) for an analysis of his views on race. See also Aparicio (1998: 38–44).
- ² For critiques of the *El Barro* myth (and its claim for whiteness) see González (1976, 1993). See also Guerra (1998: 45–122).
- ³ For a critique of Pedreira, see Flores (1993: 13–57). On Blanco, see Díaz-Quiñones (1985: 13–83).
- ⁴ See the magazine *Nómada*, no. 4, mayo 1999, San Juan, Puerto Rico, "Dossier: Luis Palés Matos," pp. 1–44 (of the dossier, which begins after page 54 in the magazine), for articles by Antonio Benítez Rojo, Rubén Ríos Avila, Hugo Rodríguez Vecchini, José Luis Vega, Lilliana Ramos Collado, Mercedes López Baralt, and Gabriela Tineo. See also Díaz Quiñones (1982: 73–129).
- ⁵ See Frances Aparicio (1998), Vera Kutzinski (1993), and Robin Moore (1997). Clearly, many poems or songs written about mulatas are racist and sexist and don't need too much commentary. But for the likes of Palés Matos, Guillén, Villaverde (and others), there is considerable more complexity (not to mention irony) and a need to sort out that complexity with nuance.
- ⁶ One could claim that Tapia y Rivera's *La cuarterona* is a tragedy by virtue of wanting to refute Freyre's quote, without Carlos truly seeing the social power that enforces such a perception.
- ⁷ See Godreau (2000). She credits Antonio Díaz-Royo for the term.
- ⁸ For more on Puerto Rican hip-hop see Flores (2000), Santos Febres (1997), and Rivera (2003).
- ⁹ In the song "Loíza" Calderón addresses issues of racism, identity, police brutality, and equality (or lack of) before the law. Here is an excerpt: "Me quiere hacer pensar/que soy parte de una trilogía racial/donde todo el mundo es igual/sin trato especial/Sé perdonar/eres tú quien no sabe disculpar/no hay cómo justificar tanto mal./Es que tu historia/ es vergonzosa, entre otras cosas/cambiaste las cadenas/por esposas." [Wanna make me think/I'm part of the racial trilogy/That we are all equal/Nobody treated special/I know how to forgive/you don't know how/no way no how/to justify so much evil/Your history is a shame/that I can name/instead of chains/you use handcuffs".] (Calderón 2002).
- ¹⁰ For a critique of González's essay, see Flores (1993: 61–70) and Carrión (1996: 46–66).

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