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Yes, It Isn't: Afro-Caribbean Identity in Puerto Rican Poetry, from Guayama to Loisaida

"Ten con ten": an untranslatable tonal palindrome, and the title of a poem by the Puerto Rican Luis Palés Matos. It is rendered as "Neither this nor That" in Julio Marzán's anthology of twentieth century Puerto Rican poetry, *Inventing a Word*. In this poem, Palés refers to his green island, *outlined* in pirate and black: "Estás, en pirata y negro/mi isla verde estilizada" (Palés 2002, 139). If I have opted for *outlined* rather than Marzán's choice of *designed* to interpret the poet's *estilizada*, it is because of the two lines that follow: "el negro te da la sombra/te da la linea el pirata." (the black man giving you the hue/and the pirate the line) Again, the translation is mine, and certainly *el negro* could simply be black, the color, but here *el negro* is weighed against *el pirata*, and both are contributing to the form and contour of the island that is located: "en un sí es que no es de raza/un ten con ten de abolengo/que te hace tan antillana . . ." (in a yes it isn't about race/a blurriness of lineage/that makes you so Antillean . . .) (All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.)

Would the words ambivalence, incongruity, contradiction, and ambiguity be necessarily negative? Not necessarily, but all components of "Ten con ten," of the Antillean psyche, of the need to find a sound and a word to express all those souls, so much asking to be addressed and to be sung in Puerto Rican negritude poetry. Leslie Wilson lists five primordial reasons why Afro-Antillean poetry written in Spanish warrants an analytical study: to determine its origins, to describe its essential characteristics, to signal its important contribution to Latin American letters, to determine its importance and influence outside of Latin America, and finally to

indicate how this poetry reflects the feelings and aspirations of the Afro-Antilleans (13). I will focus only on the last reason listed, not only because it encompasses all the other reasons, but also because it contains a very Palesian question: “Por qué ahora la palabra Kalahari?” (Why now the word Kalahari?)

The word Kalahari refers to an African region from where many Puerto Rican slaves originated, and for Palés, this word is: “escondida como un insecto en mi memoria;/picada como una mariposa disecada/en la caja de coleópteros de mi memoria.” Marzán’s translation of those lines is as follows: “concealed like an insect in my memory;/impaled like a mounted butterfly/in the beetle box of my memory” (1980, 26-27). In other words, the African past concealed, silenced, trauma internalized, left for dead, needs to come out into the light, understood, felt, accepted, Africa needs to speak, to express its soul or numen that Palés Matos considered to be at the frontier where the mundane touches the spiritual (Marzán 1995, 26). Now to the heart of the matter in this incursion into the quick of ambivalence: whether there has been a solution found, or at least a direction toward a greater understanding of the contradiction, whether what needed to be expressed was indeed expressed, or whether the answer still lies within the confines of the ambivalence in this doorway to time that leads from Guayama, the birthplace of Luis Palés Matos, to Loisaida, spiritual and cultural homeland of the Nuyorican poets, a Spanglish word for the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

The comparatist Jean-Claude Bajeux affirms, somewhat unfairly, that four dates sum up the life of Luis Palés Matos: 1898, 1915, 1937, and 1959 (109). Unfortunately, such a minimalist approach does the poet no justice, 1898 and 1959 are simply the dates on each side of a hyphen that represents a life lived, and 1915 was the year that Palés Matos published *Azaleas*, his first collection of poetry, a

collection that Bajeux judges to be commonplace, pretty, and precious (111), and that Mercedes López-Baralt sees as straddling modernism with its motifs of orientalism, spleen, and mythology, and the ironic mundaneness of postmodernism and its colonial rhetoric (2009, 10). The result is nothing but one really significant date, 1937, the year of the publication of *Tuntún de pasa y grifería*. It is not so much that the year of birth and of death lack importance, but barring suicide 1959 remained outside the realm of choice, and the poet had no say when it came to 1898, even if this would have been an excellent if not symbolic choice of a birthdate, that of a pivotal year in the history of the Caribbean, a year that coincided with Puerto Rican independence from Spain as well as with the invasion of Puerto Rico by the United States.

Such was the political backdrop at the time of the birth of the poet Luis Palés Matos. Up until that moment, Puerto Rico had been on a path toward autonomy, a path initiated shortly after slavery was abolished in 1873. After much strife and many deliberations, Spain finally granted the newly formed Puerto Rican government an autonomy that the historian Lisa Pierce Flores describes as approaching that of Canada (67). But this victory was short-lived and erased by the quasi-immediate U.S. invasion of the island that, in turn, led to U.S. military occupation from October 1898 to May 1900, and subsequently to the enactment of the Foraker Act, followed by the Jones Act, and total U.S. control of the island.

While the historian Arturo Morales Carrión demonstrates that the invaders knew little about Puerto Rico by citing the American geologist Robert T. Hill who was surprised that the sum total of the literature on the island would hardly fill a page in a book (130), another historian, Jay Hinsbruner, argues that the U.S. occupation subjected the island's colored society to an alien and deeply odious race prejudice precisely because whites in post-Civil War United States considered any person with

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the slightest degree of black blood to be legally black and subject to the full weight of discrimination (9). According to Hinsbruner, U.S. racism produced two broad results in Puerto Rico. While the first result gave a new meaning to the quest for whiteness and exacerbated tensions between those who were white and those who were not, the second result, more significant in my opinion, discouraged Puerto Ricans of African descent from acknowledging or even attempting to understand their heritage (10-11). It still should be noted that, in spite of the numerous arguments for minimal racial discrimination in Puerto Rico before U.S. occupation, racial discrimination did in fact exist before U.S. occupation, the U.S simply added fresh foreign fuel to the existing inferno.

It holds true, however, that the impact of United States racial attitudes, that Hinsbruner describes as nefarious because they dissuaded Puerto Ricans of African descent from associating with the civil rights movement and embarking upon a quest for self-identity, did not prevent Luis Palés Matos from initiating what Leslie Wilson refers to as "la modalidad poetica negra" (the black poetic modality) in 1925 (11). Hence, a pivotal date in the life of Luis Palés Matos that Bajeux chose not to mention: 1925, the year that for some marked the birth of *poesía negra*, or black poetry in Spanish, for lack of a better term or a better year, and admitting the arguments against such a classification. For Leslie Wilson is correct, there is no such thing as *poesía negra*: "La poesía negra es poesía pura. La poesía pura no tiene color […] Lo que hay de negro en esta poesía es la transparencia lírica del sentir de las Antillas" (12). (Black poetry is pure poetry. Pure poetry has no color […] What constitutes blackness in this poetry is the lyrical transparency of the texture of the Antilles.) Bajeux adds that black poetry, and more specifically the black poetry of Palés, is at the intersection

of the vision and the reality, and that far from being an escapist vision of Africa, it is a prophetic revelation that renders Africa surreal as opposed to unreal (115).

It was approximately two years after the publication of *Azaleas* that Palés began to write *poesía negra*. López-Baralt affirms that the 1917 poem titled "Danzarina africana" marks a hiatus in Caribbean literary history and renders Palés the indisputable initiator of the negritude movement in the Spanish-speaking Antilles (1997, 95). Although this is a "who-came-first" type of argument, it is important to bear in mind when studying Palesian *poesía negra*, since Palés has often been accused of only approaching the African question from a European perspective, in other words from a distance.

Castro de Moux points out that the black woman rendered by Palés in his early years, was not so much the Antillean woman, but rather the biblical Queen of Saba from the Judeo-Christian tradition (6). In fact, this likening of the black woman to the Queen of Saba seemed to be widespread at the time since another Puerto Rican poet, Luis Llorens Torres (1878-1944), also sung the black woman via bible-inspired themes, again the song of songs of King Solomon.

But this biblical approach at times appears to be only an attempt to mask an erotic obsession with the black woman. In the poem titled "La Negra" (The Black Woman), Lorens Torres lauds the raw sexuality of "La caliente potranca;/hecha para subir sobre ella en pelo/la cuesta de la noche a la mañana;/digna de ensangrentar en sus ijares/mis espuelas de plata" (Albornoz 88). (This hot mare/made to be ridden bareback/along the coast from night to morning/worthy of bloodstaining in her flanks/my silver spurs.)

The critic Ian Smart remarks that the Cuban Nicolás Guillén would be made uncomfortable with the influence that such poems had had on light-skinned Cubans.

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For the poets who had penned poems of the sort had "[…] gone into an almost frenzied state of creativity, producing exotic, erotic verses in which the black female persona of generously proportioned hips and *nalgas* (posterior) literally held sway, exuding earthy, sultry sensuality" (Smart 33). In spite of being labeled a *cultured poet*, Palés was among the poets accused of spreading this so-called contagion.

Now to "Danzarina africana" in hopes of pinpointing the origins of the so-called pandemic. According to Castro de Moux, "Danzarina africana" is not representative of Palesian negritude because it was written within the framework of the modernist literary standards (96), and also because it adheres to the stereotype of the black woman as a savage (6). What Castro de Moux is making reference to in "Danzarina Africana" are the lines: "¡Oh negra densa y bárbara! Tu seno/esconde el salomónico veneno./Y desatas terribles espirales,/ cuando alrededor del macho resistente,/revuelves, porosa y absorbente,/como la arena de tus arenales" (*Poesía* 116). (Oh corpulent and barbarian negress! Your breast/hides Solomon's venom/And you unleash terrible spirals/when around the resistant male/you turn, absorbent and porous/like the sand from your sand dunes.)

Again, all roads lead to ambivalence: the nascent *poesía negra* sung the black woman's raw sexuality, the erotic proximity to the bestial. Anything African was necessarily primitive and pulled on the primal impulses of unconsciousness. The result is a desirable woman often described with what the critic Ian Smart refers to as clichéd expressions such as *grupa* and *anca*, which normally refer to the hindquarters of animals (132). The same ambivalence goes for *cultured* versus *popular*. Time and again, critics such as Margot Arce de Vásquez and Tomás Blanco reiterated that Palés Matos a cultured poet, lest anyone forget.

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In fact, the word *culto* (cultured) came up so often in reference to Palés, as opposed to *popular* when it came to Nicolás Guillén, that it began to ring much like a reminder that Palés was white, and therefore unworthy of such lowliness, or incapable of seeing black from within, or of translating the spirit of the black race. In other words, the analogy was that cultured was to white what popular was to black. So perhaps Palés wasn't all that serious about black poetry, or meant something else when he wrote black poetry, or was attracted to the mud, or decided to write black poems because he was bored with Western civilization. Consequently, his Afro-Antillean poems were deemed "merely the literary postures of a man too sophisticated to really believe the romanticism he was espousing (Marzán 1995, 28).

Bajeux considered all the above-mentioned objections to be useless because they overlooked what he considered to be essential: "le poème dans sa specificité, en tant que langage clos sur lui-même, réalité particulière et autonome irreductible à toute analyse qui ne soit, à proprement parler, littéraire" (125). (the poem in its specificity, as language in a closed circuit within itself, a particular and autonomous reality that eludes all extra-literary analyses.) It is precisely for that reason that Bajeux judged useless all talk of Palés's race and all considerations as to whether or not a sizeable community of former black slaves had once thrived in Guayama.

However, if not for the purpose of an analysis of Palesian poetry itself, Guayama in the beginning of the 20th century may be taken into consideration for better understanding Luis Palés Matos, the bard from Guayama. Critics such as Castro de Moux do indeed dwell on Guayama as one of the keys to understanding why Palés would break away from the *criollista* movement and come to the conclusion that Puerto Rican and consequently Antillean identity should be sought in Africa rather

than in Iberia, and also why Palés would eventually identify with the mulattos of Guayama instead of with the white ruling class (11).

Known as the city of the sorcerers because of the influence of the slaves and their descendants, Guayama was once at the center of the sugar cane industry (Ibid 7). Thus, Palés's formative years were spent in a racially divided, economically and socially elitist and prejudiced society "donde no ocurre nada,/todo esto se muere, se cae, se desmorona,/a fuerza de ser cómodo y estar a sus anchas, " or in English, "where nothing happens,/all this dies, falls, collapses/from living easy and content with one's lot" (Marzán 2000, 15). At the time, as was the case throughout the island, the breaking news and vital issues concerned the forfeiture of independence, therefore no shift into the postcolonial, the replacement of one colonizer by another, the dilemma of cultures and languages (whether to opt for the English or the Spanish), and the racial problem that was social, economic, and cultural. There were also the difficulties involved in determining race, for it was not merely a question of black or white, but also of all the hues in-between. Furthermore, there was a dual nature to race and/or skin color, one composed by the internal choice or identity, the other being the reflection in the mirror, what others said out loud or whispered, keeping in mind that the two could be in eternal conflict. Such conflictive dualities would eventually mold the Palesian discourse.

In such a society, or in such a town, although racially black poets did exist, they were either in an oral or a musical tradition (Marzán 2000, xi). Castro de Moux offers the explanation that if blacks were not writing poetry it was because of poverty and lack of access to formal education (29). Such a fate did not necessarily befall the mulattos who belonged to all different strata of society. It was in fact the mulattos and not the blacks who were influential in Palés's formative years in Guayama, among

them: Tomás Carrión Maduro, a chronicler of the fights for autonomy, Tomás Bernardini de la Huerta, a distant relative of Palés's and a theatre owner, Manuel Mártines Dávila, journalist and critic, and Luis Felipe Dessús, editor and poet whose pseudonym was Danton, in honor of the French Revolution, and who expressed racial and social consciousness in many poems, notably "Indiana," as cited by Castro de Moux: "Yo soy indio y africano/borincano,/donde razas muy ardientes confluyeron;" (28). (I am Indian and African/from Borinquen/where very ardent races coalesced)

On the one hand, in Guayama there appeared to be friends, teachers, different social classes, intellectual effervescence, and cultural and political debates, on the other a surface tedium and conformity, all of which contributed to the Palesian discourse. The poetic voice could very well have been galvanized by an initial feeling of exclusion, by socio-economic inferiority, and also by a growing concern for the disempowered. Consequently, there was a shift, a need to find an identity in order to work towards expressing an identity, as well as a call for countercultural expression. Having to choose between Spanish culture and U.S. culture, Palés chose none of the above. Initially, he toyed with *criollismo* which basically consisted of choosing the native, Spanish-speaking, white Puerto Rican peasant over the racially prejudiced, strong and superior U.S. invader and his English language. But *criollismo* did not satisfy the need for a deeper level of understanding, and Palés eventually chose Africa. Initially, the approach was indeed from a European and intellectual distance. Eventually, the understanding would become more authentic, as in the 1921 poem "Esta noche he pasado" (Tonight I Passed) and the 1925 poem "Pueblo Negro" (Black Town) that, for many critics, does mark the definite beginning of Palesian negritude.

"Esta noche he pasado" depicts the experience of passing through a black town. Immediately, there is the suggestion that the passerby or traveler has chanced

upon this town, since this "caserío inmundo" (1971, 105) (disgusting hamlet) provokes dismay and outrage. In other words, the passerby did not seem to be expecting to see such a place, so the question that arises is: ¿how did the passerby get there? It does not appear to be by choice, so it has to be by accident. Suddenly, the gaze shifts in the second stanza, from being the observer the passerby becomes the observed: "Los hombres me miran hostilmente, /y en sus ojos de agudas miradas agresivas,/arde un fuego africano y bermellón de cólera" (Ibid). (The men stare at me with hostility/and in their sharp, aggressive gaze, /burns the African fire of vermillion and rage.) The third stanza brings more images of what is referred to as a "barrio oscuro" (dark neighborhood), making this poem the very first barrio poem, a harbinger of other barrio poems to come with the Nuyorican poets movement.

Such a choleric and dismal atmosphere in the dark barrio makes the passerby wonder if a group of sorcerers and warriors is dancing around a fire nearby. But this cannot be, because: "La pompa jocunda de estas tribus ha muerto" (Ibid 106) (The jocular pomp of these tribes has died), and the people in this dark barrio are left only with a remote sadness, a passion for alcohol, a hatred of the white man, and the insatiable lust of crude and primitive impulses. This is very far from the image of the corpulent black woman with the swaying hips. Here, the images emerge from reality rather than from books, as critics such as José Robles Pazos often implied. Again, Palés's mastery of the language and psychological insights have often been overlooked or disregarded. Instead, critics have focused on the poet's race and education, just to prove that he was incapable of approaching the black theme with authenticity.

In the introduction to *Poesía, 1915-1959,* Federico de Onís makes reference to Robles who affirmed that a popular poetry would have surged from the direct

observation of “los negritos borinqueños” (8) (little Puerto Rican blacks), instead of coming from, as the critic Tomás Blanco declared, the “exotic Negro of travelers, missionaries, slaves, explorers, and ethnographers, with an admixture of Haitian royalty, Cuban ñañigos, childhood reminiscences of slave songs, and other West Indian flavorings” (de Onís 12). Tomás Blanco did, however, deem the 1925 poem “Pueblo Negro” to be Palés’s first Negroid poem, best work, and attainment of real originality (Blanco 12).

Similar in its languid first lines to “Esta noche he pasado” and beginning with the same two words, “Esta noche” (tonight), in “Pueblo Negro” the poet is again obsessed with the vision of a black town (pueblo negro). But in this poem, the black town becomes a “pueblo de sueño” (2002, 111) (fantasy town) with exotic names, as if words, sounds, and the sound of exotic places were the only possible doorway to this place. Africa has been internalized, as is conveyed with words such as “sueños” and “brumas interiores” (dreams, internal mistiness). Initially, the poet depicts the scene under a raging light blanketing the landscape, and then in a more tranquil mood, as if in a sad effort to find a paradise lost, to arrive at the quick of the soul: animals, sounds, and a black woman singing in the shade of the coconut palms. While listening to her song: “todo se va extinguiendo, /y solo queda en mi alma/la ú profunda del diptongo fiero, /en cuya curva maternal se esconde/la armonía prólifica del sexo” (Ibid 113). (everything starts to switch off, /and the only sound left in my soul/is the deep U of the feral diphthong/in whose maternal curve lurks/the prolific harmony of sex)

In an effort to explain why critics either doubted Palés’s intentions when it came to his *poesía negra*, or mocked “la sangre crudita del blanco catédratico” (López-Baralt 2002, 22) (the vulgar vein of the white academic), or simply

disregarded it, or declared that black art had nothing to do with Puerto Rico, de Onís explains that it was not so much the value of the poetry that was questioned, but rather the significance of its black aspect weighed against Puerto Rican reality and the ideological debate concerning poetry's role in defining the national character. In this critic's opinion it was just as wrong to identify Antillean reality with negritude as it was to totally alienate negritude from this same reality (13). Furthermore, any attempt to consider the Antilles as one was both wrong and right because it overlooked the cultural and historical differences between the Antillean nations. There is a deal of truth in that statement, since there continues to be debate as to which countries or territories are effectively Caribbean or Antillean.

While, as Thomas Boswell explains, to most U.S. geographers the Caribbean consists of the islands in the Caribbean, plus the Bahamas, and the Turks and Caicos, excluding the Caribbean littoral of South and Central America and Mexico, for European geographers and residents of the non-Hispanic islands the Caribbean is defined all the islands between North America and South America to the east of Central America and Mexico, plus Belize, Guyana, and French Guyana (19). Boswell adds that in an attempt to better define the Caribbean, the geographer Gary Elbow has suggested three concentric zones: the core, which consists of all the islands everyone agrees on; the fringe, which consists of the islands outside of that core; and the periphery, which extends all the way to the northern coasts of Venezuela and Colombia, and the eastern coasts of Panama, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, as well as southern Mexico. Such recommendations much resemble those of defining family and deciding in which concentric zone to put the cousins, second cousins, in-laws, and exes.

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The blurry boundaries described above demonstrate that the polemic is as alive in the present time as it was in 1933 when Tomás Blanco addressed the question of Palés's negritude once again and asserted that the black man in the poem "Numen" for example, was hypothetical and abstract, and in fact a black man who would be totally exotic in the Antilles. As to Palés's expression of Africanness and his poetic vision, it was not only the vision of a white man, but that of a blond man in the Antilles (27). Such critique carries the weight of condemnation for having dared define the national character in terms of the African, as well as for having sought out the most beautiful, appropriate and expressive words.

The Palesian *numen* is the essence, the soul, and at times the question is whether it was the search for the soul of *poesía negra* or if the writing of *poesía negra* represented in itself the search for the soul. In "Numen" it suffices to pronounce words such as Tembandumba and Macandal to cross the threshold to this other place, the numinous site. For Marzán, Tembandumba and Macandal are numina or defining principles that are either evoked or invoked when the poet thinks about Africa (76). An argument for these names being numina is the fact that Macandal, the poisoner, eventually became the poison itself when packets of poison were referred to as *macandals*. The invocation is the spell that makes names and words glide into other dimensional places. The invocation catapults the poet into being, and expands his consciousness so that it approaches the essence of thought. So does the dance, the candombe in "Numen" that, "despierta el tótem ancestral" (awakens the ancestral totem). This may indeed appear to be Africa fantasized, a non-existent Africa, but the poet is well aware of that, in fact, "Baila el negro en la soledad. /Atravesando inmensidades/sobre el candombe su alma va/al limbo oscuro donde impera/la negra formula esencial" (*Poesía* 207). (The black man dances in solitude. /Crossing

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immense expansions/his soul goes over the candombe/toward the dark limbo ruled over by/the numinal formula of black) For Marzán, more than a description of black reality in Puerto Rico, this endeavor to grasp the numen is an incursion into the spiritual world, which in turn is a world beyond words. "Between it and the mundane world, the world of sounds and silence, stands the doorway to the numinous world: the song without words, the poem" (84). Thus, the faraway land becomes the essence, and Africa converts into Palesian poetics.

In fact, the Palesian poem contains everything, even the mundane, the tedium, the political, the cultural confusion, the dilemma of English and Spanish, the Antillean, the Puerto Rican. For Jaime Benítez the Puerto Rican subconscious is characterized by a spiritual despondency, and a sense of uselessness, of impotence, and of failure, and the poetry of Palés Matos addresses this spiritual despondency (169, 191). There is a distinct possibility that this malaise is tied to history and to the fact that Puerto Rico is indeed, as D'Agostino affirmed, an anomaly (91). Again, Puerto Rico never gained independence, and the enactment of the Jones Act in 1917 granted U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans and at the same time more closely integrated Puerto Rican economy with U.S. economy. Over the next forty years, and in spite of efforts at increased autonomy, Puerto Rico grew increasingly dependent on the U.S. as a source of capital and at the same time much resembled the other "welfare colonies" of the region (Ibid 93). The result being that between 1955 and 1970, approximately one third of the Puerto Rican population moved off the island. Dennis Conway writes that in 1970 over one million Puerto Ricans had moved to the United States, mostly to New York City, Miami, or Chicago (341).

If I have chosen to include historical facts and some population statistics in this study of Afro-Puerto Rican poetry, it is because the poets who came after Palés

were born in Puerto Rico's twentieth century, when the island's fate was unfolding and the above-mentioned events were occurring. It also better explains Puerto Rican migration to the U.S., Puerto Rican's reactions to exile and nationalism, the ambivalence of U.S.-Puerto Rican relations, as well as the terms Nuyorican and AmeRican. In the poem titled "Puerto Rican Obituary," the poet Pedro Pietri depicts anonymous Puerto Ricans—Juan, Miguel, Milagros, Olga—who, "All died yesterday today/and will die again tomorrow/Dreaming/Dreaming about queens/Clean-cut lily-white neighborhood/Puerto Ricanless scene" (120). These were people who were employed, "as lavaplatos porters messenger boys/factory workers maids stock clerks/shipping clerks assistant mailroom/assistant, assistant assistant/to the assistant's assistant" (Ibid 123). And they all died hating each other for different reasons, all having to do with envy, someone's used car being in better condition than someone else's, someone having a color television set, someone else making more money on the same job, and Manuel died hating all of them, "because they all spoke broken English/more fluently than he did" (Ibid 124). And they all died in the United States, "Never knowing/the geography of their complexion" (Ibid 124). The complexion remains, but in this poetic obituary the exigencies of life in the barrio took precedence over self-image and racial identity. Furthermore, those anonymous names were so removed from the rest of society, so utterly erased, insignificant, and unseen, that they turned against themselves or their own people, simply because no one else was watching them. Thus, Manuel dying, hating his fellow Puerto Ricans, becomes an expression of self-hatred.

Now I turn toward other Puerto Rican poets in an attempt to read this national poetry in light of itself, its itinerary, its route, its fate, and its direction. Often included in anthologies, "Ay Ay Ay de la Grifa Negra" by Julia de Burgos (1914-1953) who

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was almost a generation younger than Palés but who predeceased Palés by a few years. Here again, the words *grifo/grifa*, as in *Tuntún de pasa y* ***grifería***. This is not a totemic word, and much less a poetic or numinous one. It can be judged an ugly word, *un feismo*, that has everything to do with self-image and racial discrimination. There was a time when *grifo/grifa* was used to denote the child of a native Antillean (Taíno, Arawak) and of a black. Eventually the word came to mean kinky hair, or black things (grifería). It was most likely kinky before it was related to being black, since it probably comes from the French word for claw or talon, *la griffe*. Since kinky hair is scratchy, and it is curled much like a talon, this could very well be at the origins of the word *grifo*, a claw of sorts.

Julia de Burgos's poem begins much like a lament. In fact, the sounds *Ay Ay Ay* do imply weeping, pain, and lament. Initially, upon embarking upon this reading, there is a sense of disappointment for instead of black pride there seems to be nothing but dismay over being a black woman with kinky hair, thick lips, and a flat nose. While Guillén's *negro bembón* (thick- lipped black man) got angry when they called him *bembón*, Julia de Burgos's black woman weeps: "Ay ay ay que soy grifa y pura negra: grifería en mi pelo, cafrería en mis labios;/mi chata nariz mozambiquea" (de Albornoz 182). (Ay ay ay I am kinky and pure black, my lips are thick/my Mozambican nose is flat) Only once in this first stanza does she weep and laugh at the same time: "Negra de intacto tinte, lloro y río/la vibración de ser estatua negra." (Black of pure hue, I cry and I laugh/the vibration of being a black statue.) For López-Baralt this poem represents the fusion of de Burgos's three levels of consciousness: the sexual, the social, and the racial that allows her to celebrate her condition of being female and mulatta (1997, 84). Although I see no celebration here, only dismay, I do agree with López-Baralt when

she affirms that this poem can be read as a response to Palés's *Tuntún* that had been published a year earlier.

Although Palés often expressed the sensuality of black woman, there is no example throughout his work of such plaintive weeping over racial facial characteristics. If there is anything in Palés that could be interpreted as racial slight, there would be instances in "Preludio en Boricua" (Prelude in Boricua) where there is indeed reference to "tuntún" which alludes to *betún* or black shoe polish. In the Antilles, blacks, if they are very black, can be called "negritos de betún" or black shoe polish blacks. However, the word *tuntún* may also be an onomatopoeia: the pounding repetition of the drum. Other racially questionable lines can be found in "Preludio en Boricua" where there is an allusion to "aristocracia macaca" (aristocracy of monkeys) and to the little black Cuban breaking the mulatta mare (2002, 87). However, these depictions are from without, whereas the one rendered by Julia de Burgos appears to be from within. Another difference is that while Julia de Burgos was never chastised for thoughts, opinions, or expressions, Palés was mocked even by fellow poets such as Clara Lair in her 1950 poem, "Trópico amargo" (Bitter Tropics).

What Clara Lair chose to convey in "Trópico amargo" was her immense disdain for Palés's love affair with the mulatta of the "Filí-Melé" cycle: "Al salir a la calle topé a la negra bestia/que tu inflaste de hyperbole" (López-Baralt 1997, 88). (Upon going out I ran into the black beast in the street/the one you inflated with hyperbole) By "black beast" the poet is referring to Palés's mulatta. As it turned, out, the poet Clara Lair did not consider this black beast to be as sensual and impressive as Palés described her, on the contrary, nothing but a modest-looking, submissive girl. The result is: "Alacranes de rumba hincaban torso y pies/al chimpancé lampiño y la sierpe estucada…/Luis Palés, por crear belleza de la nada/como Diós, se te ha vuelto

tu mundo ya al revés." (Scorpions of the rumba sinking their teeth into the torso and feet/of the hairless chimpanzee and the serpent in stucco/Luis Palés, for having created beauty out of nothing/Like God, your world has been spun inside out.) The poetics of a poem such as this one seems to defy poetry itself, even mocking the notion of extracting beauty from nothingness.

Appearances again and again, the white man finding beauty in the mulatta, and the white woman poet finding nothing, nothing but a plain girl and an object of contempt, or even reacting to the mulatta as the poets Julia de Burgos, Willie Perdomo, and Martin Espada reacted to their own reflections: lost in the house of mirrors, de Burgos and Perdomo occupied by self-consciousness, and Espada trying to remove the racist alter ego from his wound.

De Burgos's poem is similar in tone and mood to Willie Perdomo's "Nigger-Reecan Blues (Santiago 91)." Willie Perdomo, however, wrote in English, and Spanglish at times, and instead of being a child of the Caribbean island, he was a product of the north, of the United States of America. Perhaps Miguel Algarín would have labeled Perdomo a "mongo." In the poem "A Mongo Affair," Algarín describes the mongo as: "el borinqueño/who's been moved/to the inner city jungles/of north American cities/mongo is the rican who survives/in the tar jungle of Chicago" (1995, 109). Unfortunately, survival comes at a price, so Algarín implores the "viejo negro africano" (old African man) not to believe the deadly game or the "fetching dream/of life improvement in New York/the only thing you'll find in Boston/is a soft leather shoe up your ass" (Ibid 110).

Willie Perdomo's subject finds himself in similar circumstances. The title of the poem contains the word blues, which is a reference to music with African roots. The blues sang the deep sadness of a silenced and subjected race. Hence: to feel blue.

Here, the poet has the Nigger-Reecan blues. A shift has occurred, from Puerto Rican to Nuyorican to AmeRican to Nigger-Reecan, a shift that seems to leave all the other Puerto Ricans trailing behind when it comes to blues. The poem begins as would a dialogue in a dark barrio, "Hey, Willie. What are you, man? Boricua? Moreno? Que?" It is written or spoken in English, with Spanish thrown here and there. Here, the English language has prevailed. Unfortunately, the result is "a Black man with an accent" who insists that he is, in Spanglish, "Yo soy Boricua! ¡Yo soy africano! I ain't lying'. Pero mi pelo es kinky y kurly y mi skin no es negra, pero it can pass" (Ibid). He is black, but he doesn't look black, he is not black, and he looks black, he speaks English, but he cannot totally express himself in English, yet he doesn't know Spanish all that well, and suddenly curly is spelled with a k, just like kinky. In fact, nothing has changed, this is the realm of Palés Matos's "Ten con ten."

Perdomo's poem closes with renewed ambivalence. Initially there was an emotive reaction to the mirror, the barrio's racism and the racism of the "madam blankeeta de madeeson avenue." The answer to why the boy has the Nigger-Reecan blues is that he is referred to as a Spic: "No different than a Nigger! /Neglected, rejected, oppressed and depressed/From banana boats to tenements/Street gangs to regiments . . ./Spic! Spic! I ain't nooooo different than a Nigger." The indiscreet blue lines speak for themselves. The irony is that the rant against racism, this outrage at being the object of discrimination, finally reveals profound racism, a racism that turns against itself, an I-don't-deserve-to-be-considered-black, an auto-racism as in autobiography, a closed circuit. But perhaps this continues the quarrel of the popular versus the cultivated, the raving slam being a popular way of approaching the matter, as well as the quarrel of the black versus the white and the black versus the black, and of the English versus the Spanish, from bilingual to nilingual.

Interestingly, Palés focused more on the black body than on the black face, whereas many contemporary poets still trod down to the sound of negro bembón. The poet Martin Espada does, however, struggle to find a reaction other than shame or anger when confronted with the slur. In the poem "Niggerlips" the poet remembers that in high school he was often called niggerlips by someone named Douglas whose favorite pastime was driving around black neighborhoods with an unloaded gun, "to scare niggers/like crows off a tree/he'd say" (152). Feeling unhomed by the racial slur, the poet, in turn, remembers that he got his lips from his great grandfather Luis whom the family kept secret, "and kept no photograph. /My father remembers/the childhood white powder/that failed to bleach/his stubborn copper skin/and the family says/he is still a fly in milk" (152). The conclusion and the message of hope here is that a fly in the milk is worth more than an unloaded gun.

Although Palés often experienced similar spiritual dislocation or unhomeliness, an ever-fleeting lack of identity, and a sensation of being either humiliated or erased by the Other's gaze, he expressed it otherwise, or more carefully. For example, in "Lamento," the tone is plaintive and the white man is depicted as a white shadow capable of harming the baby in his crib. It is as if a choice forever had to be made, and there was no possibility of a compromise, or a synthesis, not even in the mulatto who carried the different cultures. However, Benítez affirms that there was a message of hope in Palés's last negroid poem "Mulata Antilla." According to Benítez, the message conveyed in this poem is that the white man eventually lets go of his nostalgia for Europe and fully accepts the Antillian. It is no longer a question of being black or white, it is of being of color, not "de color" because in Spanish that particular term has bad connotations, but being of some color, in this case kissed by the Antillean sun could be enough. Benítez, however, remained guarded since only

the future would say if there was any possibility of overcoming the spiritual despondency of Puerto Rico (191).

Palés's preoccupations and themes continued to be expressed in Puerto Rican poetry well after his death: nationhood, self-image, identity, race, language, and the feeling of spiritual despondency that Benítez addressed at a conference at the University of Puerto Rico in 1938. The difference is that for some later poets, particularly those who left the island, language and culture were lost and some concerns eventually changed into hatred and self-hatred. The result was a more popular poetry that perhaps dared to say more, but oftentimes said less. A good example is in the poem "The Sounds of Sixth Street" by the Nuyorican poet Martita Morales. Often anthologized, this poem begins as an attempt to answer a child's question" ¿Mami, porqué tu blanca y papi tan?" (8). (¿Mommy, why are you white and daddy's tan?) Although this is a young child who does not yet have total command of the language, the child in this poem has command of neither language, and has been raised straddling the two, choosing whatever word comes first. The poet herself was probably raised in a similar fashion, and odds are that she has limited command of the Spanish since she made a grammatical error with the word *porqué*, unless of course that was a voluntary mistake.

Initially, the answer to the questions enumerates what the child cannot understand, for example that someone being called Chocolate wasn't being called by his name, but by his skin color, and that the Puerto Rican people are a mixture of many different races. Soon, the tone changes into that of hatred and resentment for the "honky Ass-bourgeoisie" who will not allow their daughter to have a boyfriend with an Afro or, "con el pelo grifo/because he looks black/and black to them is dirty." (or with kinky hair…) Finally, the poem begins to unravel with a shout, "MOTHER

FUCKING white ass/this is a Puerto Rican girl." The last nine lines repeat that she is a Puerto Rican girl who rebels and will continue to fight because she knows she is right. The only stone left unturned is whether or not the child was satisfied with the answer.

Such concerns and ambivalent feeling for the United States and the white man are by no means unique to the 20th century. Towards the end of the 19th century, the poet José de Diego expressed this same frustration but in a less personal and more militant tone: "We shun concepts that would reduce us to an island of/Thieves./We shun, despite your historical reversals, the language and the/spirit of the Anglo people./We speak another language, with other thoughts" (26). In the end the poet bids the U.S. to go to the devil and leave the Puerto Ricans with God. The historian María Teresa Babín wrote that José de Diego (1867-1918) was considered by some critics to be a precursor of modernism and an initiator, and that his poetry and speeches carried the message "embodied in the flag, the coat of arms, the historical and legendary past, and the dream of independence" (331).

But comparable thoughts and feelings were expressed by Puerto Rican poets living in the United States in the seventies and eighties. In "Situation Heavy," Angel Berrocales sends an ambivalent message to democracy, Congress, and the entire United States, accusing them of creating today, and yesterday, and the sorrows of tomorrow, "And if people are not for you but against you,/you push your dope and tell the people to have hope," then thanking them for their schools, "You taught me how to manipulate the so-called great/and how to have a good debate./And I'll keep next to you by going to your schools./I'll keep going to your schools, you dumb fools" (79-80). Such attitudes are indeed questionable and debatable.

Analogous in tone is Miguel Piñero's poem, "The Book of Genesis According to San Miguelito" where, "God was riding around Harlem in a gypsy cab/when he created the people/and he created these beings in ethnic proportion/but he saw the people lonely and hungry/and from his eminent rectum/he created a companion for these people/and he called this companion/capitalism/who begat racism/who begat exploitation/who begat male chauvinism/who begat imperialism/who begat colonialism/who begat wall street" (63). Although there could be debate as to the order of lineage, these lines convey the message of disappointment and resentment tied to U.S.-Puerto Rican relations. A founder of the Nuyorican poets movements along with his close friend Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero was born in Puerto Rico in 1946 and raised in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where the Nuyorican poets pursued the racial, social, and economic discourse in exile. Before his untimely death in 1988, Piñero immortalized the Lower East Side when he asked that his ashes be scattered, "From Houston to 14th Street/from Second Avenue to the mighty D," as well as where, "the hustlers and suckers meet," just so that, "the faggots and freaks will all get/high/on the ashes that have been scattered/thru the Lower East Side" (Algarín 1994, 5-6).

Bimbo Rivas (1939-1992), another one of the founders of the Nuyorican Poets Café, was considered to be the inventor of Loisaida. In the poem titled "Loisaida," Rivas describes this neighborhood in Spanish the fourth stanza, "Increíble/una mezcla, la perfecta/una gente bien decente/de todas rasas (sic)" (361) (Incredible/a mixture/the perfect one/of decent people/of all races), and in English in the last stanza, "O what a 'hood . . ./even with your drug infected/pocket parks, playgrounds/where our young bloods/hang around/waiting, hoping that/one day when

they too/get well and smile again/your love is all/they need to come around./Loisaida, I love you" (Ibid 362).

With the Nuyoricans many issues having to do with race, nation, and identity remained somewhat similar to those addressed by Palés, but a new popular expression of these issues emerged. The everyday problems the Puerto Ricans abroad faced were expressed in everyday terms, and they had to do with debt and joblessness, and carving out a place in a hostile or uncaring society, an effort that called for wide range of alternative behaviors that could go anywhere from the very positive such as entrepreneurship and creative endeavors, to hustling, substance abuse, and criminal behavior. Furthermore, by the 1980s, as can be seen in some of the poems cited above, several new matters surfaced and suddenly the Puerto Ricans were no longer dealing merely with racial and social discrimination at home and abroad, suddenly there was also a focus on drugs, H.I.V., and homosexuality. Written in Spanglish, Piñero's "La Metadona Está Cabrona (Methadone is a bitch)" alludes to drug addiction and its consequences, "and your wood won't throb, it just flops . . . flops . . .flops . . ./can't yell out ghettocide since you did abide & signed/on the dotted line/to an agreement of shame who's to blame/but you" (66). This poem is significant in the sense that it is not necessarily casting out the blame on the Other. On the contrary, here the subject assumes responsibilities for his actions, and even fails to take his plight completely seriously, since the poem ends with some humor and a suggestion that there is definite understanding of how the outside world turns, "next mention with no hesitation/a manifestation a deadman's declaration/that you were no longer on/DRUGS/but/on/Medication . . ." (Ibid).

Another approach to the ambivalent past, and the conflict of languages, cultures and races, can be found in the only Latina woman poet included in the list of

founders of the Nuyorican movement. Sandra María Esteves takes on topics such as crime and H.I.V as well, but with a language that assuages the battle of the cultured versus the popular. In "It Is Raining Today," Esteves asks the rain, "Where is our history?/What are the names washed down the sewer/In the septic flood?" before imploring the rain, "Give me back my rituals/Give back truth/Return the remnants of my identity" (19). In "Blanket Weaver" Esteves implores the weaver to "weave us a song of many threads/that will dance with the colors of our people/and cover us with the warmth of peace" (135). In such poems, the search for identity begins with an utter lack of self and of home, and builds from that point onward. For a time, everything appears to have been lost, a condition that approaches a feeling akin to a crisis, a loss of self, disturbance, unhappiness, estrangement, an odd feeling of humiliation, of being nothing other than a commodity, in other words unhomeliness. Esteves also expresses such feelings in "I look for peace great graveyard" where "new york spits my eye/oil dragged hummingbird, is there no peace/sometimes I want to die I feel just die" (136).

In fact, from the 19th century to the present the unhomely has been a focus of reflective thought. It was alienation for Marx and the *not-at-home*,--or the fundamental character of our being in the world,--for Heidegger. *Das Unheimliche* was the title of Freud's 1919 essay, which was translated into English as *The Uncanny*. For Homi Bhabha, *das Unheimliche* is precisely the unhomely, which he considers to be a paradigmatic colonial and postcolonial condition (9). By taking into consideration the different meanings of the word homely Freud points out how the term becomes increasingly ambivalent. "[…] until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*. The uncanny (*das umheimliche*, the unhomely) is in some way a species of the familiar (*das heimliche*, the homely)" (134). This paradox, however, does not

express a tautology. Rather, this slipping and sliding of meaning suggests the identity of a difference and the difference of an identity. The terms homely and unhomely never fuse, they remain apart, and this being apart allows them to come in contact with each other at different moments in time. Unhomely is the way of being at home in the world, and also at home, in privacy. Homely is the way of not being at home in the world.

The result is the sheer terror and anxiety that Esteves expresses in "I look for peace great graveyard," and Palés renders in many poems, markedly in "Humus" where the poet is beleaguered by an abysmal vision: "Sube por mis raíces, del fondo de mi mismo,/un vaho oscuro de sueño y de cansancio./Estoy completamente solo frente a mi abismo . . ./¡Qué horror, qué aroma rancio!" (1971, 130). (Surging through my roots, from the depths of my being/a dark breath of somnolence and lethargy./I stand alone before my abyss . . ./What horror, what rancid an odor!) This experience of horror will induce the poet to wonder if it is all worthwhile. "¿Y para que seguir? Ya ni siquiera/siento deseos de escribir . . ./escribir, escribir, sería la manera/de salir/a la luz de una inútil primavera./¿Será mejor morir?" (Ibid 131). (And why persevere? When I don't even/find in myself the desire, to write . . ./writing, writing would be the way/to ascend/to the light of useless springtime./Would it be better to die?)

Such expressions of unhomeliness appear to be the numen of Afro-Puerto Rican poetry from Guayama to Loisaida, as is the need to create words to further the expression. Among some of the words, names, and sounds created and repeated by Palés are many that mimic the sound of the drum, as well as names for characters he created such as Tembandumba de la Quimbamba, Mulata-Antilla, Lepromonida, and Fili-Melé. López-Baralt mentions that Puerto Rican imagination has already entered one of these names into the lexicon: Tembandumba, used to refer to good looking

mulattas, and of utmost importance for Puerto Rican national identity since it marks the poetic beginnings of the celebration of African female beauty and is a harbinger of the U.S. slogan of the 1960s *black is beautiful* (2009, 22).

The character Mulata-Antilla also lauds the beauty of the African woman. There are in fact two poems titled "Mulata-Antilla" in the *Tuntún*, the original from the first edition of the collection (1937), and a second version dated 1949. The second version is longer and contains almost the entirety of the first, except for the last two stanzas. Both poems address mulatta-Antilla who becomes both a woman and the landscape itself, mother nature, the past, the present, and the future, in other words a goddess who is and at the same time announces the awakening of the Antilles, "Ahora eres, mulata,/glorioso despertar de mis antillas" (2002, 147). The second version delves deeper into this character. One moment Mulata-Antilla is an empress who uses the coconut and the plantain as artillery, "Imperio tuyo, el plátano y el coco,/que apuntan su dorada artillería/al barco transeúnte que nos deja/su rubio contrabando de turistas" (Ibid 194). (Your empire, the plantain and the coconut/who point their Golden artillery/ in the direction of the passing boat that deolivers/its blond contraband of tourists.) But she is also a Walkyrie, "En potro de huracán pasas cantando/tu criolla canción, prieta walkiria, /con centellante espuela de relámpagos/rumbo al verde Walhalla de las islas." (On a colt of a hurricane you ride while singing/your creole song, dark Waljyrie/with scintlillating spurs of lightning/on the road to the green Walhalla of the islands.) And she is the Biblical Shunammite taken to David's harem in hopes of reviving his failing powers as well, "yegua de Faraón, oh Sulamita!" (mare of the Pharaoh, oh Shunammite!)

Lepromonida, in turn, is yet another name or word of Palés's making, perhaps a fusion of the words lepra (leprosy) and demonio (demon). Again, there are several

version of the poem itself. In the Tuntún edited by Mercedes López-Baralt, Lepromonida approaches the avatar of the Haitian Erzulie that personifies darkness. Lepromonida may also be a riddle: the riddle of evil, of death, of fear, and of ambiguity, since she is a black queen with white feet who reigns over red tribes. She is also a spider of darkness, of dreams, and of nightmares. Lepromonida is: "Incendios, pestes, gritos, narcóticos azules, /venenos, horcas, fetos, muertes…" (2002, 145). Again, Lepromonida herself is the riddle of pestilence blue narcotics and the possible answers to the riddle: venoms, fetuses. At the same time the poem contains a proverb or counsel of prudent action: "¡Tened, oh capitanes del agua y de la tierra,/tened un grande y largo miedo a Lepromonida!" (Ibid). (Beware Captains of the oceans and of the earth, have great and lasting fear of Lepromonida.)

There exist different interpretations of another name created by Palés, that of Fili-Melé. Although the Fili-Melé cycle does not necessarily fall under the rubric of *poesía negra*, these poems do make reference to the young, mulatta university student of whom Palés became enamored in 1949. For critics such as López-Baralt and Alfredo Villanueva, Fili-Melé could very well be an anagram for Filomela, or the Philomele of Greek mythology who was raped then mutilated by her brother-in-law, and who was finally turned into a nightingale by the gods who took pity on her. In zoology, Philomel refers to a genus of birds including the nightingale. On the other hand, the name contains the Greek word philo (I love), but there is debate as to the etymon of mele. Villanueva is of the opinion that it means song (López-Baralt 2009, 40). For Miguel Enguinados, who claims to have heard it from Palés Matos himself, Fili signifies sweet and delicate, while the French *melé* refers to mixed blood. The French oculd very well be, but it would seem perilous to take into account the sounds produced by other languages, if not for the simple reason that in that case the

possibilities would be endless. What matters above all is the need to create new words in order to better grasp or express the numen.

As to the Nuyoricans, after having become a word themselves, and forced English into Spanish, as in Loisaida, they also created new words such as "Dusmic" that, according to Algarín, "defines the process of transforming aggression being directed at you by another person (or, more generally, society) into your strength" (1975, 129). When it comes to these created words, it is a pity that fortune or history did not give Puerto Rico (or Cuba, or the Dominican Republic for that matter) a historical character or a word such as Malinche. Had this been the case Malinche would have been a portal, much like Tembandumba or Lepromonida or Fili-Melé. It would have sufficed to name her in order to cross the threshold. Or perhaps the history of these islands did produce a Malinche, but she simply remained unwritten, and the task has therefore been to find a word for someone representing the different cultures and the different languages in one person: the Indian (for lack of a better word), the black, the mulatto, the mestizo, the white, the English language, the Spanish language. Someone who belongs, who defines, and at the same time betrays a culture.

So what is it about? Has it changed? Evolved? Metamorphosed? Yes, it is not a question of language, of social class, of unhomeliness, of money, of acceptance, of insecurity, of education, of pretty words, ugly words, of kinky hair, of thick lips, it is not a question of self-image, of being two times or three times removed, or even of despair. Yes, as the bard from Guayama expressed so well, it is not a question of race.

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