REFLECTIONS ON WEST INDIAN LITERATURE: TALKING ABOUT CULTURE

SARGASSO
2016-17, I & II
SARGASSO Reflections on West Indian Literature: Talking About Culture (2016-17, I & II)

Sargasso, a peer-reviewed journal of literature, language, and culture edited at the University of Puerto Rico, publishes critical essays, interviews, book reviews, and some poems and short stories. The journal seeks submissions that have not been published elsewhere, including new translations of previous publications. Sargasso particularly welcomes material written by/about the people of the Caribbean region and its multiple diasporas. Unless otherwise specified, essays should conform to the guidelines of the MLA Handbook. Short stories should be kept to no more than 2,500 words in length, and poems should be kept to thirty lines. See http://humanidades.uprrp.edu/ingles/pubs/sargasso.htm for submission guidelines and additional information. For inquiries or electronic submission, write to: sargassojournal@gmail.com.

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INTRODUCTION: REFLECTIONS ON WEST INDIAN LITERATURE: WILC 2015

Lowell Fiet and María Cristina Rodríguez

In her book of essays, *We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture* (2012), Sylvia Wynter reconceptualizes the history of the Caribbean adapting Enrique Dussel’s terms “gaze from below” and “the Caribbean as the ultimate underside of modernity.” As literatures and cultures emerge from communities, researchers in the humanities should not only address communities as agents of culture, but also as partners who contribute expertise, share decision making and ownership of knowledge production. When Wynter says “talk about a little culture,” obviously “little” does not mean small—Caribbean culture is multi-layered, complex, intriguing, and in that sense, very “large.” With irony, she seems to mean talk “a bit” or “a while” about something that, although expansive and omnipresent, frequently gets ignored in official and academic discourses. So let’s start talking about Carnival, Obeah, Shouters, Vodou, tea meetings, Rastafarian drumming, Kalinda, Big Drum, santeros, curanderos, Nine Night, Jonkonnu, bomba, etc., etc.—“a little culture”—as well as more formal literature, art, theatre, dance, and music.

This introduction to the West Indian Literature Conference catalogue, held at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, in 2015 did not foresee the amazing events that would envelope our island. Multiple interruptions to the publication of this issue, which was ready to go by April of 2017, were prompted by the dire economic reality of a government that faces the wrath of bond holders who insist on squeezing every penny left over after filing for bankruptcy, and cut $300 million from the most important higher education institution: the public university with the most accessible tuition fee on the island, off the island, and all over the entire United States of which, unfortunately, we remain a colony of. With its eleven campuses across the island and its enrollment of
55,000 students (even now with massive population displacement), this higher education institution established in 1903 as a “normal school” to train teachers to educate an impoverished population under the jurisdiction of a military and later a U.S. appointed administration, has become the center of humanistic and scientific debates and writings, and established connections with other Caribbean universities (University of the West Indies, Dutch and French) through the celebration of conferences, symposia, panels, and publications like *Sargasso*.

Among these interruptions, the most devastating were the two 2017 September hurricanes, Irma and María, which destroyed our infrastructure—power, water and sewer systems, roads, bridges—the flattening of houses and buildings, and the loss of so many lives (despite the local governor and US president death numbers). The UPR Río Piedras campus reopened at the end of October with less than acceptable facilities, and extended its 1st semester to mid-February and its 2nd semester until mid-June.

After hosting the West Indian Literature Conference at our Río Piedras Campus, we asked participants to submit their revised papers as essays to be considered for a special issue of *Sargasso*. Of those submitted, the editors and a group of evaluators considered the eight essays included here as representative of our initial proposal for the WILC and now *Sargasso*.

The first essay by Keja Valens, “A Little Puerto Rican Food Culture,” gives our readers a historical perspective of how through Puerto Rican cook books, addressed primarily to middle-class women, shape a locally defined perspective of Puerto Rico and its particular food production. Natalya Mills-Mayrena in “Minshall’s Mas: (Re)introducing Street Theatre in Contemporary Carnival of Trinidad” explores Peter’s Minshall’s mark on today’s carnival celebrations through the incorporation of abstract art and performance.

Cristal Rosana Heffelfinger-Nieves in “Battered Bodies, Aching Souls: The Representation of Pain in Malika Booker’s *Pepper Seed*” discusses notions of pain and how these become bodily images in this Guyanese 2013 collection of poetry. Guillermo Rebollo-Gil in “Have It Any Way You Like: Riffs on Poetry and the Political in Puerto Rico” interacts with Willie Perdomo’s poem “Have it your Way Combo” from his 2014 book *The Essential Hits of Shorty Bon Bon* to explore Puerto Rico’s daily social upheaval. The essay seems even more relevant today after hurricane Maria.

Rachel L. Mordecai’s “The Pathology of Sex and the Domestication of Desire in Zee Edgell’s *In Times Like These*” explores the views of the protagonist in Edgell’s 1991 novel on affection and sexuality without extending...
this understanding to other Belizean women. Vanessa Vilches also explores a woman’s critical view of her assigned roles in “Matergrafías: en La muerte feliz de William Carlos Williams,” the 2015 novel by Puerto Rican Marta Aponte Alsina, through the thoughts and words of the poet’s mother and the writer’s reflections on her own mothers.

In Mary Ann Gosser-Esquilín’s “Talk about a Little Ecocritical Culture: Guadeloupe as a Toxic Island,” stories from different timelines and cultural backgrounds are explored in the 2010 Toxic Island by Guadeloupian Ernest Pépin and French-British crime author and Guadeloupian resident Timothy Williams. Paul Humphrey’s “El manto que cubre el mar’: Religion, Identity, and the Sea in Rita Indiana’s La mucama de Omicunle” examines the multiple components in this 2015 hybrid novel and the use of water as a space of separation and unity.

We hope that this rich array of thematics contributes to the ever changing Caribbean reality and the constant retelling and reassembling of our history. Hurricanes and a distraught economy may test the fiber of what we are made of, but our reactions to them will always be a source of strength and unity.
ESSAYS
SARGASSO (2016-17, I & II)
Abstract

*Cocine a gusto* (1950) and *Cocina criolla* (1954), along with their antecedent *El cocinero puertorriqueño* (1859), transmit the recipes for founding an independent Puerto Rican home. As they provide culinary reference for home cooks, they participate in a tradition of Caribbean cookbooks that stake out claims for the culinary heritage and the nutritional and gastronomical acumen of the nascent, or embattled, nation. *El cocinero puertorriqueño, Cocine a gusto* and *Cocina criolla*, nourish a vibrant, independent national culture. The latter two also ensure the place of “women’s work” in anticolonial nation-building, and affirm Spanish as the language of a free Puerto Rico.

Keywords: food culture, Puerto Rican history, feminism, nationalism

Resumen

*Cocine a gusto* (1950) y *Cocina criolla* (1954), junto con su antecedente *El cocinero puertorriqueño* (1859), transmiten las recetas para la fundación del hogar puertorriqueño independiente. Mientras proporcionan referencias culinarias para los cocineros caseros, participan en una tradición de libros de cocina caribeños que reclamen la herencia culinaria y la perspicacia nutricional y gastronómica de la nación naciente, o asediado. *El cocinero puertorriqueño, Cocine a gusto y Cocina criolla*, nutren una cultura nacional vibrante e independiente. Los dos últimos aseguran también el lugar de “trabajo de las mujeres” en el nacionalismo anticolonial, y afirman el español como la lengua de un Puerto Rico libre.

Palabras clave: gastronomía, historia puertorriqueña, feminismo, nacionalismo
Traditionally, one of the most common coming-of-age gifts from a Puerto Rican mother to her daughter is a set of cookbooks: *Cocine a gusto* and *Cocina criolla*. First published in the 1950s, both books were bestsellers.¹ Through the first decades of the twenty-first century, Puerto Rican women declare, “*Cocine a gusto* is a tradition in my family. There is a copy in every home;” “[*Cocina Criolla* is] the best for real puertorrican cooking. I have a copy since newlywed, 44 years ago and have purchased copies for each of my daughters.”² Along with their predecessor, the 1859 *El cocinero puertorriqueño*, *Cocine a gusto* and *Cocina criolla* transmit the recipes for the formation of an independent Puerto Rican home. More than practical guides on how to cook, I argue, they are symbolic markers, participating in a tradition of Caribbean cookbooks that offer recipes for national culture. Cookbooks convey and shape national culture through their content (the history, nutritional value, and modes of preparation and consumption of food), their form (chosen language), and the activities that they indicate (creating, nurturing, sustaining families and communities but also reading, communicating shared practices). Like the crafts that Frantz Fanon describes as “awakening national consciousness” with work that, “full of life, … invites participation in an organized movement,” *El cocinero puertorriqueño*, *Cocine a gusto* and *Cocina criolla*, nourish a vibrant, independent national culture (242). The latter two also affirm Spanish as the language of an independent Puerto Rico and ensure the place of “women’s work” in anti-colonial nation-building.³

Colonial domination has been long and persistent in Puerto Rico. *El cocinero puertorriqueño* was written at an early moment of anti-colonial sentiment and articulation of Puerto Rican national culture, when the colonial power was Spain and when independence movements were flourishing throughout its Caribbean colonies.⁴ That the three editions of *El cocinero puertorriqueño*

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¹ In 1960, both *Cocine a gusto* and *Cocina criolla* were already in their fifth editions. *Cocine a gusto* is now in its seventeenth edition and *Cocina criolla* in its fortieth edition.

² These quotes, representative of my own anecdotal evidence as well as over 75% of substantive (longer than one sentence) reader reviews by Puerto-Rican identified women on Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com, are from S. Sierra and “ilumisan,” respectively.

³ Arjun Appadurai offers the touchstone discussion of the role of cookbooks in national culture.

⁴ For a wonderful treatment of the publication history of *El cocinero puertorriqueño*, see Efraín Barradas.
coincide with the rise of revolts against Spanish rule in the mid-to-late nineteenth century highlights the links between a burgeoning national culture and an emerging nation. The last edition of *El cocinero puertorriqueño* came out in 1890; Puerto Rico was granted a charter of autonomy from Spain in 1897.

*El cocinero puertorriqueño* does not list an author. The front cover of the 1859 edition announces: “Esta obra, que contiene cuanto de selecto se encuentra es los tratados que corren con más aceptación sobre el arte de cocina, es la primera de su clase que se publica en este país, y de la mayor utilidad para las amas de casa y para todo el que tenga interés en conservar su salud.” In 1859, housewives and others wishing to preserve their health could be found on both sides of the colonizer-colonized divide in Puerto Rico. Of course those taking up arms against Spanish colonialism were also in large part its descendants, even if they were also the descendants of Puerto Rico’s indigenous and slave populations. Ostensibly written for the small but powerful population of literate women and health-conscious men living in Puerto Rico in the second half of the nineteenth century, *El cocinero puertorriqueño* opens with a prologue that refers to cities in Spain, quotes Góngora, and locates the book in a tradition of food writing that runs from Russia to Spain to Washington to “el cielo abrasador de las Antillas” (8). It might belong to Fanon’s period of colonial “expropriation” or of the colonized’s “frantic acquisition of the culture of the occupying power” (237). Nonetheless, the “crystallization of national consciousness” indicated in the title page’s reference to “este país” is also developed throughout the book (239). The title, *El cocinero puertorriqueño*, especially as it follows just three years after the 1856 *Manual del cocinero cubano*, emphasizes the particularly Puerto Rican rather than the Spanish or even the “Antillano.” Only one recipe, “Sopa puertorriqueña o puré paradisiaco” overtly participates in the exoticism of the Puerto Rican that characterizes a certain colonial (or neo-colonial) perspective; all of the other dishes marked as Puerto Rican include in their

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5 The authorship remained unknown until Barradas’s 2010 revelation that it is J.P. Legran.
6 It is difficult to determine exactly the size of this population, but there were fewer than 100 girls’ schools in Puerto Rico in 1860 and in 1890 there were close to 150 girls’ schools (Gustavo Bobonis and Harold Toro, 38).
7 “Paradisiaca” here most directly refers to “musa paradisiaca,” the botanical name given to the plantain by Carl Linnaeus in 1753. That botanical name itself derives from Indian and Roman writings from around the first century AD claiming the banana as the famous fruit of the Garden of Eden. Linnaeus’s selection of “paradisiaca” certainly draws on this
names “puertorriqueño” (4), various Puerto Rican city names (3), “del país” (11), “campesino” (11), and the most popular “criollo” (35). Furthermore, El cocinero puertorriqueño conveys both the distinctness of the Puerto Rican and its parity with other national preparations as it includes Puerto Rican identified versions of everything from “arroz” to “pichones,” differentiated from Spanish, Cuban, French, English, or Portuguese versions. Many more recipes than those signaled as Puerto Rican also include local ingredients such as plantains, ají, malanga, and ñame with no special explanation or disclaimer for those who might not recognize them. It simultaneously asserts the place of local ingredients in Puerto Rican national food culture and validates local terms for them as well as the local knowledge of how to identify and understand their basic properties. As El cocinero puertorriqueño assumes and exemplifies Puerto Rican cooking culture, it claims and creates Puerto Rican national culture.

history, but also on the associations between colonial conquests (where bananas were an increasingly profitable prize) and paradise perpetuated by Europeans in the eighteenth century. Legran’s use of “paradisiaco” can be seen as not only repeating but furthering that exoticizing view in light of the fact that he could have chosen to use the more common “plátano,” which he uses in the list of ingredients, for the name.

While, by the mid-nineteenth century these products had achieved a degree of transatlantic circulation, they are native or naturalized to the Caribbean and serve as markers of local and national cuisine. The UCSC Center for World History project on Bananas in World History explains the case of bananas and plantains: they may have been present in the Americas as early as 200 BC but were definitely brought to the Americas, probably from the Canary Islands and Indonesia, by the Portuguese in the 1500 and 1600s. They spread rapidly, not the least as a staple food for slaves on Caribbean plantations, so that by the nineteenth century “Plantains had become thoroughly ubiquitous in Central and South American countries, and had even been “naturalized,” that is, adopted and integrated into local cultures so much so they became synonymous with certain countries’ cuisines.” Ají offers another important example: Columbus was looking, among other things, for “pimiento,” a plant in the Piper family, when he arrived in the Caribbean. The piper family was not present in the Caribbean when Columbus arrived, but ají grew and was used in cooking in Puerto Rico. Columbus mentions ají, in relation to pimiento, in his “diario a bordo.” Ají is in the Capsicum family, but its taste has certain similarities with plants in the Piper family. As a result, ají was often called “pimiento” as it was brought back to Spain and incorporated into Spanish cooking (and called pepper as it was brought back to England and incorporated into English cooking). The word ají comes from the Arawak haxi or axi. Other varieties of Capiscum are native throughout Latin American and the Caribbean. The Nahuatl term chil is the origin of the other common current term for fruit from the capsicum family, chili.
But my analysis of *El cocinero puertorriqueño* is just the first part of this essay and of the story of cookbooks as sites of Puerto Rican national cultural struggle. At the same time as Spain was granting Puerto Rican autonomy, it was losing the Spanish American War, and just a few months after Spain signed off on Puerto Rican autonomy, the United States claimed Puerto Rico (along with Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines) in the 1898 Treaty of Paris. At the end of the nineteenth century, Puerto Rico found itself not an independent nation but rather a territory of the United States. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century, Puerto Rican national (food) culture simmered, adjusting to the shift in (neo) colonial domination. The 1890 edition of *El cocinero puertorriqueño* remained in circulation, but only two cookbooks were published in the next sixty years, both representative of U.S. neo-colonial religious and economic forces in Puerto Rico, and both in English. Finally, in 1950 Berta Cabanillas, Carmen Ginorio, and Carmen Quiro's Mercado's *Cocine a gusto* and in 1954 Carmen Aboy Valldejuli's *Cocina criolla* pick up where *El cocinero puertorriqueño* left off in formulating a Spanish-language Puerto Rican national culture.

In the 1940s, Luis Muñoz Marín, after a series of U.S. appointees, became the first democratically elected governor of Puerto Rico. In 1950, Public Act 600 was passed, allowing Puerto Ricans to draft a constitution, and they did so, establishing Puerto Rico as an Estado Libre Asociado. Puerto Rico seemed

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9 These are the 1910 *Porto Rican Cookbook* by The First Methodist Church of San Juan and the 1948 *Puerto Rican Cookbook* by Eliza Bellows King Dooley, of “the King family of Sheffield, CT” and wife of Henry Dooley of Dooley, Smith & Co., merchants, importers, and exporters at San Juan (King). Cruz Miguel Ortíz Cuadra also treats Grace Ferguson’s 1915 *Home Making and Home Keeping: A Textbook for the First Two Years’ Work on Home Economics in the Public Schools of Porto Rico* (1915) as a cookbook; in a similar vein, we should note Elsie Mae Willsey’s series of bulletins of the University of Puerto Rico’s departments of Education and Home Economics on a variety of “tropical foods.” Willsey’s works were revised and translated into Spanish in collaboration with a variety of her colleagues for the University of Puerto Rico’s agricultural extension service in the 1930s. Ferguson and Willsey both belong to the generation of U.S.-born and educated women who took leadership positions in Puerto Rico’s nutrition services and in the University of Puerto Rico’s Department of Home Economics in the early twentieth century.

10 Quiro’s Mercado died before the first edition of *Cocine a gusto* was completed and only some editions list her as an author. I list her here, but in the rest of this essay follow the practice of referring primarily to Cabanillas and Ginorio as the authors.
to be emerging from a long period of colonial domination, first by Spain and then by the United States.\textsuperscript{11} Conceived and published amidst these changes,\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Cocine a gusto} positions the cultural work of women in Puerto Rico’s domestic economy at the center of the (re)emerging nation.

Cabanillas and Ginorio’s introduction marks \textit{Cocine a gusto} as part of a larger cultural and political project. At the University of Puerto Rico, Puerto Rican professors in the Home Economics Department were just becoming a majority in the faculty and the “Generación del 40” was affirming a Puerto Rican national literature.\textsuperscript{13} Cabanillas and Ginorio worked with a group of largely female scholars insisting on the cultural value as well as the nutritional, economic, and agricultural aspects of Puerto Rican food.\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, \textit{Cocine a Gusto}

\textsuperscript{11} At the time of its formation, as Jesús de Galindez wrote in 1954, “the new Commonwealth status is itself considered by all as an interim stage pending changes which are not easy to forecast today” (331). Much has been written since about how those changes have not really taken place, and the debate continues about both whether and how the status should change, most recently in the context of what nationalism means and does in the twenty-first century. While this essay’s focus on national consciousness and national culture does to a certain degree come down on the side of the current nationalism debate that Jorge Duany describes as “those who believe that Puerto Rican should struggle for independence to preserve their cultural identity.” My attention to the ways that cookbooks create, even more than they collect, national culture, agrees with the argument that “this struggle necessarily invokes a homogenizing, essentialist, and totalitarian fiction called the nation” (6). In other words, I am arguing for cookbooks as foundational fictions.

\textsuperscript{12} “La idea de escribir este libro surgió hace muchos años,” Cabanillas and Ginorio write in the introduction to the first edition (xi).

\textsuperscript{13} Scholars variously refer to this generation of writers as the generations of 40, 45, and 50. Seymour Menton examines the place of the University of Puerto Rico in the formation of the “Generación Puertorriqueña del Cuarenta.” In the 1920s, more than half of the professors at the University of Puerto Rico were “continental Americans” (Navarro-Rivera). Willsey, chair of the department of Home Economics in the 1920s and 1930s, reported that all of the home economics professors at the University of Puerto Rico were graduates of U.S. Universities (Nakano Glenn 83). By the 1940s, the majority were native Spanish speakers from Puerto Rico (Navarro-Rivera).

\textsuperscript{14} The key role of the Escuela de Economía Doméstica at the University and in Puerto Rico is often mentioned in passing or as needing more attention. Founded in 1908, it was among the first departments at the university (in 1996, the name was changed to the Escuela de Ecología Familiar y Nutrición). For a detailed history of the schools, see the University of Puerto Rico’s “Historia de la Facultad de Educación.” The \textit{Encyclopedia de Puerto Rico}, published by the Fundación Puertorriqueña de las Humanidades, refers
anticipates many of the points about the imbrication of political and cultural independence that Fanon would make nearly a decade later. In his 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that as “the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his [sic] own people” s/he fosters “the crystallization of the national consciousness” which “gives rise to a new rhythm of life and to forgotten muscular tensions, and develops the imagination” (240-241). This “participation in an organized movement,” Fanon writes, “very often passes unseen” because it occurs at the level of cultural imagination, but it marks “the awakening of national consciousness” that appears in cultural materials and traditions that, having been revived, are re-organized in new forms, new modes of expression, new styles and that simultaneously express and call for the nation itself (242).

Cabanillas and Ginorio trace a distinctly Puerto Rican culinary history directly from *El Cocinero puertorriqueño* to *Cocine a gusto*, when they write “en Puerto Rico se han publicado muy pocos libros en español sobre esta materia … Conocemos solamente el *Cocinero Puertorriqueño* publicado en 1859” (xi). Reviving that legacy for twenty-first-century Puerto Rican national culture, Cabanillas and Ginorio explain: “un sentimiento patriótico nos inspira a publicar este libro: darle forma permanente a las recetas que han ido pasando de boca en boca a través de generaciones” (xii). *Cocine a gusto* combines tradition and innovation as it shares both Cabanillas’s and Ginorio’s own recipes and others that they have gathered “de varias personas, en forma verbal o escrita, a veces incompletas o vagas en su expresión” (xii), but the book’s introduction to Cabanillas’, Ginorio’s, and Quiroz’s role in “el desarrollo paulatino del Departamento de Economía Doméstica de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, que será determinante en el derrotero de la alimentación puertorriqueña en la segunda mitad del siglo XX.” Ortiz Cuadra mentions in his study of Puerto Rican food education in the early twentieth century that “habrá que calibrar –y esto es tema que merece investigación–, el impacto que los cursos iniciales tuvieron sobre un grupo de mujeres [ ] con posibilidades e interés en profesionalizarse en la economía doméstica. Basta señalar a Berta Cabanillas, Rosa Luisa Stefani, Luz M. Ramos, María Teresa Orcasitas y Ester Zeijo. Sobre sus investigaciones de campo, ideas y nociones sobre la feminidad, se montaron luego muchos proyectos de educación hogareña femenina [ ] penetrados en la realidad social y económica del país y con las prácticas culinarias ancestrales” (113). Cabanillas is also author of *Orígenes de los alimenticios del pueblo de Puerto Rico, El puertorriqueño y su alimentación a través de su historia (siglos XIV a XIX)* and *El folklore en la alimentación puertorriqueña* as well as numerous articles in Puerto Rican newspapers and magazines including *Revista Horizontes*. 
specifies that it does so less to preserve or to transmit recipes that would not otherwise be so recorded as to “ayudar a la consagración de la cocina regional y ofrecer a nuestro pueblo una obra en el vernáculo (xii).” The insistence on “nuestro pueblo” and on the vernacular, the spoken language of the people, Spanish, demonstrates that part of the work of Cocine a gusto is to address and to express people with a distinct culinary and linguistic culture.

The replication of classic conquering language in Cabanillas’ and Ginorio’s introductory claim that “entrábamos en un terreno virgin y fértil” (xi) begs us to think about the contrast between the colonial project and that of Cocine a gusto. As they position themselves—two Puerto Rican women—as the conquistadors ready to impregnate the virgin and fertile landscape of Puerto Rican cookbooks, Cabanillas and Ginorio subvert the heteropatriarchal character of colonialism and also of nineteenth-century resistance to it. In the nineteenth century, men catalogued recipes, wrote for the public, and defined the contours of the Puerto Rican, even if they did so for the benefit of “las amas de casa.” El cocinero puertorriqueño offers a case in point. It addresses women, but the prologue also seems to speak from a male authorship to a male readership as it enjoins “convendrás conmigo en que [las excelencias de la mesa] es parte tan principal de la vida privada, como eminentemente social entre los hombres,” supporting the claim with a quote from Luis de Góngora (7). For Cabanillas and Ginorio, however, national (food) culture is a women’s project. They appeal to “las amas de casa puertorriqueñas” and with their “estímulo” bring to light “el fruto de nuestros empeños” (xi). The sexualized language of conquest becomes not only domesticated but also lesbianized, or at least reproduced outside of heteropatriarchal orders. From their archives and for las amas de casa puertorriqueñas, they produce a book of “nuestra cocina” where that first person plural—repeated throughout the narrative chapters in both possessive pronouns and in verbal constructions—refers to Puerto Ricans generally and to Puerto Rican women specifically.

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15 Ten years later, in the prologue to the fifth edition, the authors reiterate the point: “Además de darle forma permanente a las recetas tradicionales nuestras y enaltecer la cocina puertorriqueña, hemos abierto un surco creando y enriqueciendo la literatura culinaria de nuestro país” (xiii), adding an additional purpose of preserving traditional Puerto Rican recipes (by 1960, transmission patterns as well as culinary traditions were in flux).
As the first person plural of the introduction becomes the collective voice of Puerto Rican women who speak to one another, “nuestro pueblo,” the introduction to Cocine a gusto invokes its audience as already a co-creator of the work, in conversation with the authors throughout the process of its composition: “el interés mostrado por las amas de casa puertorriqueñas en las recetas que ofrecíamos en los artículos que publicábamos en periódicos y revistas del país, así como las cartas y consejos de nuestras compañeras y amigas, han sido un gran estímulo que nos ha ayudado en la realización del trabajo” (xi). The description of “amas de casa” reading newspapers and magazines and writing letters to the authors articulates the home as a permeable space, one that both “amas de casa” and the information that interests them enter and exit. Cocine a gusto exemplifies how cookbooks construct a space for women who, running households and reading newspapers and magazines and forming alliances amongst one another, recognize in the recipes a vital expression of their own culture and want more. With the publication of this cookbook, domestic culture asserts its place at the center of national culture. Thus the rhetoric of “tierra” and “pueblo” that permeates Cocine a gusto, as it gestures to Puerto Rican nationalist discourse of the 1940s and 1950s, shifts the land and the people from a masculine mountain landscape and the figure of the jíbaro to

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16 “Amas de casa,” is a formulation that both keeps women “in their place” as mothers in the house (ama derives from the Indoeuropean amma, mother) but also conceives of the place as one of authority, emphasized by Cabanillas’ and Ginorio’s occasional use of another formulation, “dueña de casa” (dueña derives from the Latin domina, mistress or owner). Cocine a gusto’s interventions in broader debates about industrialization and gender roles in Puerto Rico in the 1940s and 50s are oblique, but the book clearly articulates what women do in the home as “trabajo” and the “hogar” as a “laboratorio,” resonating with calls for equitable recognition of “women’s work” in the Puerto Rican labor movement of the time (1).

17 A few years later, in 1955, law 89 founded the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (ICP), “dedicada al estudio, conservación, divulgación y enriquecimiento de nuestra cultura nacional” (Ricardo Alegría). Although the ICP’s founding documents and self-authored history mention craftwork and folklore, none makes any direct reference to cookbooks or other forms of culinary art, suggesting the power of the forces ignoring or denying women’s work in national culture that Cabanillas and Ginorio and Valdejulli confronted, and the need to revisit the history of Puerto Rican national culture in order to understand the place of women, domestic work, and cookbooks in its conception. To date, the publishing house of the ICP lists a “gastronomía” category under which it has no publications.
fertile female imagery of identification and power “donde abundan las frutas” so that as the “el ingenio y la experiencia de la persona inventará otras combinaciones” we can imagine social as well as culinary reconfigurations (20).

The construction of national culture in and through a cookbook does, of course, assume and limit the audience and by extension the community and the nation to literate women. Cocine a Gusto appears at the threshold of class and racial divides that, in Puerto Rico in the early twentieth century, separate a minority of wealthy and middle-class women with access to education from the majority of poor, often illiterate, often non-white women. Cabanillas’s early writing in etiquette columns in magazines like Revista speak to an elite audience, but the work of gathering recipes brought Cabanillas, Ginorio, and Quiröz into homes throughout Puerto Rico. Cocine a gusto brings those various groups of women together, at the very least, in and as a national imaginary. An ungenerous reading along class and racial lines might see this as evidence that the national consciousness in Cocine a gusto is built off the practice, labor, and ideas of poor illiterate non-white women for the consumption and benefit of elite educated white women. That the research and publication of Cocine a gusto coincides with a rapid rise in literacy in Puerto Rico as well as widespread urbanization and massive expansions in infrastructure suggests, however, that Cocine a gusto serves not only upper-class women who have been reading Cabanillas for years but also the increasing numbers of literate, working- and middle-class, urban women. The “amas de casa” of “nuestro pueblo,” who Cabanillas and Ginorio address, are urban and wealthy enough to be expected to purchase meat (118), and also expected to raise their own poultry whose preparation starts with the selection of the live animal, the slaughter and the

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18 Menton develops the contours of land and people as articulated in Puerto Rican literature of the 1940s and 50s.
19 Appadurai emphasizes the class contexts of cookbooks as sites for the construction of national culture.
20 For discussions of women’s places in Puerto Rico in the first half of the twentieth century, see Magali Roy-Féquière, Helen Safa, Anne Macpherson. For a discussion of women’s places in Puerto Rico in the mid-twentieth century, see Palmira Ríos.
21 There is some debate about the exact literacy rates in Puerto Rico. All sources, however, agree on the rapid rise in literacy between 1940 and 1970 (Safa 18). Female literacy in Puerto Rico lags significantly behind overall literacy, both in terms of percentages and degrees of literacy: in 1950, female median education was 2.5 years and in 1960 it was 3.6 years (Albuquerque, Mader, and Stinner, 60).
plucking (151-152). Cocine a gusto’s section on the “uso correcto del horno” touts
the oven as “una de las piezas de equipo más útiles en la cocina moderna” but also
recognizes it as an appliance in whose basic use readers need instructions (5).
Similarly, instructions for “cuidado de la carne” read “si no hay nevera se guarda
en un lugar fresco y ventilado y en la nevera se pone en una vasija destapada y en la
parte más fría.” Such comments presume an audience of women in the process
of acquiring electric appliances, which perhaps excludes the persistent poor but
includes nearly all others and even the elite who purchased the first electric
appliances in the 1920s and employed domestic servants for their daily cooking
needs (118).22

The development of the electric grid in Puerto Rico belongs to U.S.-
sponsored New Deal and Operation Bootstrap programs. This and other
programs initiated in the New Deal provided much needed support to Puerto
Rico, but they also authorized the neo-colonial, patriarchal discourses and
practices that led to health and nutrition programs that, among other things,
promoted the sterilization of women and the provision of imported baby formula
and milk in Puerto Rico.23 While Cocine a gusto’s embrace of electric appliances
and fortified foods welcomes the technological progress and populist programs
that stem from the New Deal, Cabanillas and Ginorio imagine Puerto Rican
modernization as part of a very different nation-building project than that of the
New Deal. Insisting on the nutritional value of Puerto Rican products and the
ability of Puerto Rican women to prepare clean, healthy meals with them in their
own kitchens, Cocine a gusto counters the rhetoric of the New Deal, Operation
Bootstrap and related projects that constructed Puerto Rico as a kind of orphan
suffering not only from criminality but also from disease and malnutrition.24

22 Building on Melissa Fuster’s assertion that “while not necessarily reflective of actual
diets or food preferences, [cookbooks] can serve as gateways into the societies in which
they emerged,” I posit that regardless of the degree to which this broadening audience
of women actually purchased or cooked from Cocine a gusto, in its address to them the
cookbook constructs Puerto Rican national culture as theirs (2).

23 For a detailed treatment of the milk programs, see Elisa González. For a detailed study
of the programs offered in the 1940s and 1950s by Puerto Rico’s Department of Health
and Nutrition Committees, and by the University of Puerto Rico’s Home Economics
and Agricultural Extension, see Vina Viravaidhya.

24 Kelvin Santiago-Valles’s Subject People on discourses of Puerto Rican criminality and
the many critical essays on the treatment of Puerto Rican women’s fertility beg to be
joined by similar work on nutrition.
Cocine a gusto’s “consideraciones generales” echo the calls for cleanliness and good health, but their discussions of “la más absoluta limpieza [en la cocina] como garantía de la salud” place them in the able hands of Puerto Rican amas de casa (1). Cabanillas and Ginorio also highlight the nutritional values of specifically Puerto Rican products, so that while they note the vitamin C content of all fruits, they single out the “cereza colorada” as a “fruta indígena; baya pequeña carnosa de sabor agridulce, la mayor fuente de vitamina C” with a note further detailing that “en varios pueblos de la isla llaman a la cereza acerola, y ya se ha generalizado este nombre; la acerola auténtica crece en las regiones templadas de España, es una drupa y no es tan rica en vitamina C como nuestra cereza” (32, emphasis mine). Cabanillas and Ginorio subtly assert that neither U.S. rations nor imports or programs but rather indigenous produce and local practices that satisfy “el orgullo de toda dueña de casa” best assure Puerto Rico’s health and nutrition (1).

Cocine a gusto authenticates Puerto Rican food as Puerto Rican, organizes an expanding community of Puerto Rican “amas de casa” who cook it as foundational to Puerto Rican national culture and as protective of Puerto Rico’s health and well-being, and it does so for those who read cookbooks, or anything else, in the vernacular, Spanish. Language is intensely political in twentieth (and twenty-first) century in Puerto Rico. In 1901, the Department of Instruction of Puerto Rico was created under the control of the U.S. Federal government and English was imposed as the language of instruction at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) (26).

25 Ortiz Cuadra notes that the 1951 edition of Cocine a gusto includes “various canned preparation of rice with meat,” suggesting a temporary turn to imported products in a period of distinct need. In later editions, those disappear (Eating Puerto Rico, 46).

26 Founded as the Escuela Normal Industrial in 1900, the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) became a U.S. Land Grant College in 1908 when the Morrill-Nelson Act was extended to Puerto Rico. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the College of Liberal Arts, the College of Agriculture, and the Departments of Pharmacy and Law were established. In 1923 the University of Puerto Rico came under the Insular Department of Education and in 1924 the governor of Puerto Rico appointed the first Chancellor. In 1924 and 1925, the University became independent from the Department of Public Education and gained full educational autonomy. Through 1925, a majority of professors at UPR were “continental Americans.” The official language of instruction at UPR until 1942 was English and therefore all textbooks were in English. By 1942 the vast majority of professors at UPR were Puerto-Rican born and native Spanish speakers. In 1942, Act 135 created the Higher Education Council as the governing board of UPR.
instruction in Puerto Rico. In 1915, the commissioner of education allowed that Spanish be the language of instruction through grade four, followed by a transitional period in both Spanish and English in grades five to seven, and English only after that. In 1934, Spanish was reinstated as the language of instruction throughout all public elementary schools, with English as a second language starting in first grade. Two years later, however, following statements by President Roosevelt, the commissioner of education reverted to a gradational system with Spanish as the language of instruction in the first and second grades followed by a gradual increase in English-language instruction until high school where the only language of instruction was English. English was also the language of instruction at the University of Puerto Rico until 1942, when the newly formed Council of Higher Education approved a resolution declaring Spanish the preferred language of instruction at the University, not only allowing professors to teach in Spanish but also allowing the adoption of Spanish-language textbooks. In 1946, the Puerto Rican legislature passed Bill number 51 requiring that Spanish be the only language of instruction for all Puerto Rican public schools, including the University. After President Truman's veto of that bill, the University of Puerto Rico passed a resolution affirming that “as a general rule in Puerto Rico, Spanish should be used as the vehicle of teaching” and in 1949, Spanish was reinstated as the vehicle of instruction in all public primary and secondary education. Published by the then brand-new University of Puerto Rico Press, Cocine a gusto belongs to the first wave of Puerto-Rican-produced Spanish language textbooks in Puerto Rico. Although it serves as a cookbook marketed to and useful for a general public, it also has a significant didactic component, with instructions on how to

27 Resolution passed by the faculty of the University of Puerto Rico on the recent veto of President Truman of P.S. 51. Translated by Isabel Ortíz Espéndez, Secretary to the Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico. October 31, 1946. Proyecto de Idioma, Rectoría, R-186, IV, 1941-48. Archivo Central UPR, Rio Piedras, cited in Pablo Navarro-Rivera.
28 For detailed discussions of language policy and politics in Puerto Rico, see Navarro-Rivera, Sandra Rodríguez-Arroyo, E. Algrén de Gutiérrez.
29 The University of Puerto Rico Press was officially founded in 1947, building from a 1943 editorial group with a mission to edit “y fomentar la publicación de libros, monografías, conferencias y folletos de utilidad para el desarrollo de la cultura puertorriqueña.” For a history of the press, see Armindo Núñez Miranda.
organize a kitchen, lists of fruits and of meat cuts, nutritional information, and histories of food types and of Caribbean food traditions.

Tracing a general history for Puerto Rican food, the introduction of *Cocine a gusto* starts with the encounter between Spanish conquistadors and native territories and populations with “la adopción de platos de origen indio, de los que trajeron los conquistadores de la madre patria y de otros típicos hechos con los frutos de esta tierra” (xi). While this sets out a Spanish priority and base for Puerto Rican identity (“Indian” dishes were “adopted,” Spanish ones brought from “home”) and claims an indigenous heritage that only comes into being as it is erased, it also acknowledges that for Puerto Rico in the 1950s, there is no “native” culture or inhabitant that is not already the creation and result of conquest and colonialism (although it elides the cultural *mestizaje* provided by the African heritage of Puerto Rico’s slave population). The prioritization of Spain as the “madre patria” is, in this historical context, not as much nostalgia for Spanish colonialism as a rejection of the U.S. as the “mainland” of which Puerto Rico might be a (questionably) adopted child. However, *Cocine a gusto* is a pro-Puerto Rican cookbook more than it is an anti-U.S. one. Although they do not even name the U.S. as a contributing factor in Puerto Rican food history, Cabanillas and Ginorio do not reject all that comes from the U.S. Rather, *Cocine a gusto* renders Puerto Rican things like pounds and ounces, explaining “en Puerto Rico usamos la libra como medida de capacidad para áridos” (15). It relegates U.S. culinary practices and terms to secondary status, placing U.S. names for meat cuts second, under a Spanish-language heading and followed by Spanish “descripción” in the table of “descripción de distintos cortes y sus equivalentes en cortes americanos” (116-117), and putting English words for fruits in parentheses between the Spanish and Latin names (32-36).

While the narrative sections trace the voyage of Puerto Rican foods throughout the world and the passage of Spaniards and others through Puerto Rico, the food names in *Cocine a gusto* rarely refer to countries of origin. There is one “salsa española,” nothing listed as “Americana” or “de los estados unidos” and equally nothing “puertorriqueña,” and only one thing that is “criolla.”

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30 This fits with Duany’s assertion, in his overview of discourses of Puerto Rican nationalism, that “During the twentieth century, most Puerto Rican nationalists have embraced the Spanish vernacular as the dominant symbol of their culture, as well as other elements of Hispanic heritage” (10).
it comes from, however it got here, all of the food in *Cocine a gusto* becomes, by virtue of its inclusion in the book, “Puerto Rican.” Cabanillas and Ginorio exhort creativity and (re)invention from their readers, with lines such as “nos permitimos sugerir algunos de los alimentos que se pueden combinar […] pero la originalidad e imaginación del que trabaja ha de encontrar nuevas combinaciones” (252). They demonstrate this kind of creativity themselves, including recipes for things like “horchata de soya” alongside established Puerto Rican classics like “mofongo” and “arroz con habichuelas.” In this way, Cabanillas and Ginorio foster a space where Puerto Rican women become authors of a vibrant and evolving national food culture.

Published just four years after *Cocine a gusto*, in 1954, Carmen Aboy Valldejuli’s *Cocina criolla* offers a rather different intervention into Puerto Rican national (food) culture. In Aboy Valldejuli’s introduction, Puerto Rico appears only as an adjective, and the sole mention of “el país” is in the sentence “como complemento de las recetas típicas del país se incluyen otras muchas extranjeras que por su arraigo y popularidad aparecen frecuentemente en la mesa puertorriqueña” (vii). The recipes are framed not as living testimony to the vibrant nation but as “típicas,” folkloric dishes that need of the “acompañamiento” of recipes from other countries that by their volume and popularity appear much more alive. While *Cocine a gusto* addresses women who grew up with mothers and women friends who cooked, and in households where the vernacular was Spanish, *Cocina criolla*’s introduction focuses on the proposed utility of the book in teaching its readers how to cook, assuring that “el arte culinario puede adquirirse fácilmente, si se ajusta a recetas redactadas con amplios detalles y exactitudes, que darán el conocimiento equivalente a largos años de experiencia” (viii). Indeed, *Cocina criolla*’s primary audience appears to be upper class Puerto Rican women who, like Aboy Valldejuli herself, are accustomed to having cooks but decide as adults to learn to prepare their own meals.31 *Cocina criolla* foregrounds not the health or welfare of the family or the nation, but “equipo de la cocina.” Explaining that “actualmente hay en el mercado equipos especializados para ahorrar tiempo en las labores culinarias.” The first section’s focus on kitchen appliances emphasizes cooking as part of commodity culture (3). Valldejuli writes for women who can keep everything from “latas de sopa

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31 Fuster details Valldejuli’s biography and its impact on *Cocina criolla*.
de tomate (Cream of Tomato Soup)” to a “frasco de crema de leche (Whipping Cream)” always on hand to help them out when unexpected guests arrive and they need to whip something up quickly “mientras el esposo lo obsequie con un ‘cocktail’ o ‘highball’”(21). Cocina criolla offers assistance to the Puerto Rican housewife who already has plenty of it, who could easily thrive without the book, who is assured to come out on top in whatever cultural context she encounters.

Rather than Cocine a gusto’s opposite, however, Cocina criolla, serves as its perfect complement. Cocine a gusto is intellectual and populist, with education, family, and nation as central values; Cocina criolla brings an audience perhaps less primed for Puerto Rican national culture into its fold. The smattering of English words and commodities appeals to the cosmopolitanism and consumerism of the Puerto Rican elite and the upward mobility of those who aspire to join it. At the same time, Cocina criolla assimilates English into Spanish rather than vice versa, locates U.S.-made equipment as a support for autonomous domestic production of Puerto Rican and international dishes, and constructs a Puerto Rican culinary repertoire that encompasses both mofongo and lamb chops. Cocina criolla conceives Puerto Rican national (food) culture on an international stage and Puerto Ricans with purchasing power, mobility, and cultural capital who realize, in the words of Mariposa (María Teresa Fernández)’s “Ode to the Diasporican,” “that being Boricua / is a state of mind.”

Including and exceeding the differences of these foundational cookbooks, Puerto Rican national (food) culture thrives even as it continues to search for the forms that will best hold it. Cocine a gusto and Cocina criolla offer rich sources for the continued examination of how cookbooks participate in national culture, what kinds of space they claim and open for what kinds of women as national cultural agents, and how the institutional, class, political, and linguistic affiliations of “culture makers” and cookbook writers in Puerto Rico between the 1850s and the 1950s shape and reflect “lo puertorriqueño.”


First Methodist Church (San Juan, P.R.). *Porto Rican Cookbook*. San Juan, P.R.: M Burillo & Co., 1910. Print.


A Little Puerto Rican Food Culture


MINSHALL’S MAS: (RE) INTRODUCING STREET THEATER IN CONTEMPORARY CARNIVAL OF TRINIDAD

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Abstract

Peter Minshall is one of the 20th century’s dominating forces within Trinidadian Carnival. Minshall’s work (re) introduced the theater component to mas by incorporating abstract art and performance. Minshall’s methodology shifted the lens on Carnival by employing contemporary topics, traditional and folkloric content native to Trinidad. This essay illustrates the way Peter Minshall’s themes and avant-garde ideologies revolutionized the face of mas. Furthermore, juxtaposing Minshall’s philosophies with Carnival in recent years will illuminate the ways in which performing the narrative is employed.

Keywords: Trinidad, performance, carnival, mas, Peter Minshall

Resumen

Peter Minshall es una de las figuras dominantes del carnaval trinidense del siglo XX. Su trabajo reintroduce el componente teatral a mas al incorporar el arte abstracto y el performance. La metodología de Minshall cambió la apreciación del carnaval al utilizar temas contemporáneos, contenido tradicional y folklórico originario de Trinidad. Este ensayo demuestra la manera en que la temática e ideología vanguardista de Peter Minshall revolucionó la imagen de mas. Asimismo, al yuxtaponer las filosofías de Minshall con el carnaval de años recientes demostrará las maneras que se emplean para actuar la narrativa.

Palabras clave: Trinidad, performance, carnaval, mas. Peter Minshall
According to Mas Man Peter Minshall, “Carnival is an urban art form, ritual and theater that has been taking place in Trinidad since the 1860s. Mas, another term used in place of Carnival, is a powerful, communicative expression, of the spiritual and physical energy of human beings. Mas is a combination of music, dance, sculpture, and painting. It communicates with gesture and movement. It is danced; it is played” (Narine). Mas is perpetually about performance, relaying or re-telling a story. By putting on a structure or garment, you transform into something or someone that you are not 363 days a year. You are able to free yourself of certain social and religious restrictions. “Those two days you are actually yourself and you pretend all the other days of the year” (Narine). This is a vehicle that native Trinidadians as well as visitors utilize to see themselves in their existing state as well as to reflect on the past. Minshall states that “[h]ere is a little island that needs catharsis like anybody else. We don’t have either the resources or the audience for [a] Broadway season or [the] West End, but have the same needs. So what do we do? Carnival. It goes back to the mist of ancient time that it really is a celebration of life. What matters is that we are here now, and we have this festival of arts. We sing songs, we compose tunes, and we dance. And it involves society” (Narine).

History tells us that Carnival arrived in Trinidad with the French. French colonizers, their slaves, and free coloreds started arriving in Trinidad from Europe, Grenada, Guadeloupe, and Martinique in 1784. An additional surge of French arrived following the French Revolution. Most of these French settlers were Roman Catholics who celebrated the pre-Lenten festival called Carnival, meaning farewell to the flesh. Affluent French planters enjoyed dressing up in elaborate costumes with powdered wigs and masks. The act of wearing these masks on their faces during Carnival activities would become “the masquerade” and later identified as “mas.” Scholars have argued that Carnival came to the Caribbean when the Africans arrived in the West Indies. These enslaved persons had a key impact on the structure and importance of Carnival in the Caribbean. The subversive pleasure of the European Carnivals became a form of expression for the Africans stripped from their native soil and ceremonial rites. The act of dancing in the streets of the villages, masking, drums, and stilt walkers were all elements of African rituals that could be seen in Caribbean Carnivals. Esiaba Irobi argues that “[c]arnivals are native to the African continent versus Europe and indigenous African forms were not severed or sundered but were rather transformed, syncretized or creolized in
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the African Diaspora” (Irobi 896). Carnival became a site where the convoluted class and racial interactions in the midst of a diverse population have been articulated through reversal, satire, and ingenuity. Africans, slaves, free coloreds, and Europeans were forced into an uneasy cohabitation. Whether African slaves or European plantation owners brought Carnival to Trinidad is unclear; nonetheless, what is apparent is that both cultures had an immense impact on the creolization of Carnival in Trinidad.

One of the dominant forces in mas since the 1970s in Trinidad is Mas Man extraordinaire Peter Minshall. He used his works as social commentary to help energize mas with his portrayals. He transformed mas into an avant-garde form of expression. Minshall’s designs have tapped into the minds and psyche of Trinidadians as well as those who have come in contact with his creation. Minshall’s mas had a tone of awareness and responsibility. He constructed bands with performances, scripts, and scenes. His way of interpreting mas had a major impact on the consciousness of the country. Minshall saw Carnival as theatre of the streets, one of the richest occurrences in the world. Growing up in Port of Spain, he was at the epicenter of Carnival activity each year. He observed the traditional costumes and the characters that were portrayed with expression and dynamism.

Fig. 1. Dame Lorraine character in Port of Spain. Photo credit: Natalya Mills-Mayrena
At the turn of the twentieth century, characters such as the surreal *Fancy Sailor* were performed on the streets of Port of Spain. This character became popular during WWI when the sailors would dock in Port of Spain and their uniforms would become inspirational. They would wear the white sailor uniforms with an elaborately done headpiece in variations of boats, crabs, and crowns. The Fancy Sailor mas players came with their own style of walk with a decorated walking cane; they imitated the drifting and drunken sailors stumbling out of the ships.

The *Dame Lorraine* character developed after slavery to mock the dress and style of the aristocratic females of the elite planter class on the island. Men would often dress as women adorned in brightly colored eighteenth-century fashion with exaggerated chest and rear area. They would walk and dance around with masks on their faces, decorative fans, umbrellas, and large hats. The *Baby Doll* character is portrayed as a youthful woman of African descent. She is dressed in a baby’s bonnet, frills and flouncy dress. She carries a baby doll while pretending to look for the father of her child. She approaches men in the street and asks them for money for the “illegitimate” child that she carries. The *Bat* character emerged during the 1930s rabies scare in Trinidad. It is a fanged creature, dressed in a tightly fitted black or brown leotard, twelve-foot wings, and modern papier-mâché headpiece. The masqueraders would flap its wings, dance on its toes, and crawl in a series of choreographed movements to imitate the bat.

The bat costume was one of the more influential characters for Minshall. He used the physical attributes of the bat as a blueprint in creating the kinetics of his dancing mobiles. These characters inspired him to re-appropriate and re-interpret mas.

Performance art was something that Minshall was exposed to living in both Trinidad and in London while he was attending the Central School of Art, now Central St. Martins and part of the University of the Arts London. Performance had become an accepted medium of artistic expression in the 1970s. As art spaces were showing up all over the city, artists of different schools, such as minimalism and conceptual art, used performance as a weapon to struggle against conventions of art. Minshall used the streets as his space to perform his art, the art he had always known, Carnival. Prior to Minshall’s style of mas presentations, history books were used for inspiration. Themes
from Africa, Rome, and Egypt were re-created and re-enacted. Minshall decided to change the status quo of European-inspired themes and use topics indigenous to Trinidad. He implemented theater in mas in a contemporary and abstract way. He designed his own bands as he would theater productions with openings, scenes, and performances. He was successful in capturing the essence of a theme; his ability to capture and convey the mood of the mas band was impeccable. What he created was visceral and real. According to Anthony in *The Carnival of Trinidad and Tobago*, “someone shouted ‘That ain’t mas, that is theater!’ Many agreed with this view and thousands cheered Minshall, the new messiah of Carnival” (Anthony 586).

In 1983 *The River* was the first installment of designing bands as trilogies; it was considered his magnum opus. In Dalton Narine’s *Mas Man*, Minshall describes his thought process behind the trilogy: “Mas as a visual expression is close to symphonic music, beginning, middle, and end. It is a total whole with many parts and more parts within.” He used folkloric themes and vernacular
native to Trinidad to depict the story. “Each ‘section’ represented the rivers in Trinidad . . . according to Minshall, a multi-cultural and romantic collection of Amerindian, French and English sounding names” (Narine). The masqueraders would be called “The River People.” Minshall collaborated with Trinidadian fashion designer Meiling Esau to construct beautiful garments made with all white fabric. The costumes were a composite of colonial European, African, and East Indian dress. The Mancrab and Washerwoman were the two main characters in Minshall’s story. According to records at the Callaloo Company archive, “Mancrab (king of the band), a nemesis, a monster hybrid, mechanical, hyper masculine, genius, complicated and aggressive crab which represented mankind’s impulses, greed driven by technology” (Minshall and Gulick 2). Mancrab came to represent the worst of humankind’s impulses and instincts, greed and acquisitiveness empowered by technology, “progress” out of balance with nature. The design of the Mancrab consisted of four poles and the billowing cloth, overlaid with mechanical crab apparatus.

The character alongside Mancrab was Washerwoman. She was the leader of the River People and represented purity and innocence. “She was dressed in a wonderful traditional Bele costume made of all white, with the underskirt an

![Fig. 3. Man Crab. Photo credit: Derek Gay. Source: Callaloo Company Archive](image-url)
impossibly full and frilled confection of hundreds of yards of cotton organza” (Minshall and Gulick 2). Minshall states, “Mancrab, Washerwoman, and the River People was not about life but about death. Not hope or joy but about suffering. Not about wisdom, but about human greed, power, and foolishness” (Minshall, *Mas Man* DVD). The message Minshall wanted to communicate was that if men weren’t cautious about the technological development we would be the grounds of our own obliteration. Minshall was also inspired by another performance aspect practiced in Indo-Trinidadian culture, the spring festival of Phagwa or Holi. This festival is celebrated with color, songs, music, and dances. Multiple watercolors are smeared, mixed, and sprayed on the

![Fig. 4. Washerwoman. Photo credit: Derek Gay. Source: Callaloo Company Archive](image-url)
participants in the celebrations. The all-white-cladded masqueraders were to be sprayed on Carnival Tuesday with color, and this color would be representative of the pollution and havoc that Mancrab would inflict. Mancrab would first be performed at the King of Carnival preliminaries competition at the Queen Park Savannah Stage in Port of Spain a week and a half before Carnival Monday. Minshall narrates the story while onlookers sat in anticipation. The nemesis Mancrab concocted a plan to mesmerize the River People with color and splendor, which symbolized technology and material goods. According to Minshall,

Mancrab enters the stage stamping like a Kathakali dancer, to the brittle staccato rhythm of East Indian tassa drums, the bare back drummers in file at the edge of the stage. As he stamps, his mechanical claw[s] extend, clench and unclenched; the white silk canopy billows and rolls like a thundercloud. A climax of performance, the drums build to a cataclysm, then silence. Mancrab trembles, and onto the canopy above him runs rivulets of blood, drenching the white silk in red with a shuddering, the drums pick up again and Mancrab resumes his dance, now frenzied. Dripping blood, he pulls from his gut a long ribbon of silk, leaving it trailing behind as he exits the stage. The astonished crowd is stunned to silence, and then erupts in a roaring of screams, hisses, boos, curses and cheers. (Gulick and Minshall 2)

**Carnival Monday**

A twelve-foot canopy of white continuous fabric held up by poles above the masqueraders travelled through the streets of Port of Spain. The brilliance of the white color in the hot Caribbean sun was something magical, and the masqueraders felt and looked beautiful. This band would surely win the band of the year. Upon reaching the stage Mancrab and Washerwoman mimed the conflict. “The drama which one saw on the stage Carnival Monday was the fight between Mancrab and Washerwoman. She defeated him with a soft white cloth [,] the white representing the purity of the river. At her victory, the white-clad multitude –the River People– celebrated by swirling across the stage, tossing white tinsel into the air” (Anthony 586). After Washerwoman dismissed Mancrab on the stage, the story goes on symbolically through the
night. On Carnival Monday night, Minshall narrated that Mancrab used all of his technological enchantments to captivate the River People.

**Carnival Tuesday**

The white canopies that cover the River People are now rainbow colored. The rainbow that Mancrab created was representative of technology, cars, TV, and all material things. Each masquerader carried a pouch of color and was instructed not to open the pouch of color until they reach the Queens Park Savannah stage. The band arrived on the Savannah stage before sunset and thousands of spectators filled the stands to see the fate of the River People. Footage from the documentary *Mas Man* narrates:

> The tassa drummers walk onto the stage with a dealing silence. They start to play their East-Indian rhythm. Mancrab is in sight and he is doing a winner’s dance. Washerwoman’s lifeless body is escorted on the stage by two men. Her body is wrapped in red satin ribbon that comes from the gut of Mancrab. Following this scene, river maidens in all
white walk onto the stage each holding a calabash in their hand with red paint symbolizing the blood of Mancrab. The river maidens form two rows facing the north and south audience; they slowly pour the red paint onto their white clothing. At this point the women break out into a dancing frenzy. This moment symbolizing Mancrab’s success in taking over the River People. The music trucks start to play soca and the band enters the stage. They now open their pouches and pour the color all over themselves in hysteria. The chaos begins; a ritual frenzy is taking place as they lose themselves. Spray hoses with color were also introduced and showered the masqueraders. With the song playing “wet meh down” the masquerader[s] in their glee. (Gulick and Minshall 3)

Mancrab defeated Washerwoman by using his technology. Distracted by Mancrab, the River People did not notice that their once pristine white has now become darkened and muddied. The River People have lost their leader and, now in the hands of Mancrab, they are forever ruined.

Fig. 6. Washerwomen being carried off the Queens Park Savannah Stage. Photo credit: Derek Gay. Source: Callaloo Company Archive
Many Trinidadian artists and mas makers noticed after Minshall's presentation of *The River* in 1983 that technology and greed already had a handle on the Carnival arts and production. This theory became evident with the influx of the “pretty mas” and the glam bands. The response to *The River* band and presentation was enormous. Everyone, spectators, masqueraders, commentators and newspapers had an opinion.

When it came to the turn of the King of the Bands it was almost no competition at all. From the time Peter Minshall’s King Mancrab came on the stage there was an uproar of approval. Minshall who had once said stated ‘Carnival is Color’ seemed to be now making the point that Carnival was essentially drama. His masqueraders took the stage in blinding white costumes of all designs and their mission was not simply to play mas but to make a philosophical and striking commentary on life, in another Minshallesque departure that the Trinidad Carnival had not seen before. (Anthony 586)
Performance and theater were obvious components mixed in with traditional elements to create a story of truth, a truth that Trinidadians were experiencing. The citizens knew Minshall was accurate in his portrayals, but they would not respond to the cry or try to stop what was in their foreseen future. The band *The River* was definitely the people’s choice that year, but the judges were left bewildered. They decided that Carnival was no place for Minshall’s uncompromising theatrics and artistic aspiration. In the Carnival competition that year, *The River* came in at tenth and last place. Minshall, however, was happy with his success in winning the People’s Choice Award. Minshall’s mas was for the people and this was validation that the people accepted this true art form, and the people were the only ones that mattered: “Peter Minshall was able to really feel the impact of his work during the las’ lap when the band was heading back to their base. He was surrounded by masqueraders that were pleased and much obliged. Minshall had been accustomed to being greeted and praised for his work, but this time it was different. There was a special certain intensity to it, articulated in a way he’d not heard before. “‘Thank you!’ they said, ‘for the experience’” (Gulick and Minshall 4).

In retrospect, Peter Minshall foresaw the shifts happening and the future changes in Carnival. In the years following *The River* experience, the rise of the
bikini, beads, and feathers in mas began to dominate Carnival. Carnival started
to become more about economic advances than about distinctive costumes that
were creative and thought provoking, symbolic of the culture, and invested
in social commentary. Can the island of Trinidad and Tobago claim to have
the “Greatest Show on Earth” when the costumes are being mass produced
and manufactured outside of the island? Can Carnival or mas be used as an
authentic art form to express culture and the people of the island?

The modern band leaders in Trinidad and Tobago have capitalized on one
of, if not the most important aspects of, Carnival, crafts, and paraphernalia
production. They have exploited the Carnival celebrations, diminished their
authenticity, and depleted the quality and integrity of the costume designs.
They have done so by utilizing the outsourced labor from places such as Asia
to create costumes at lower rates while preserving all financial gain. Global
capitalism and class structure have created tensions with the upper and lower
classes. The increase in the elite class having a strong hold on Carnival also
creates a false sense of alienation for some of the citizens on the island as
well as for the caribpolitans\(^1\) that return “home” every year to partake in the
festivities. The idea of the author and authorship comes into play. Modern day
band leaders, who are not necessarily artists and make no claims to having a
love of the arts or the promotion of the culture; however, they do have a large
stake in what is produced in the Carnival arts. Cultural representation and the
spirit or aura of Carnival is now being manipulated and compromised. People
often compare Trinidad’s Carnival to Carnival in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil.
Due to tourism, Brazil’s Carnival is often depicted in the media as women
adorned in body paint or bikinis, beads, and feathers similar to what one sees
in Trinidad’s Carnival. However, a visit to the Carnival of Brazil would lead to
the realization that these commodified female bodies that are showcased in the
media represent a mere handful within the larger Carnival framework. Most of
the costumes in Rio’s Carnival are fully themed, choreographed, and created in
the local samba schools.

\(^1\) CARIBPOLITAN /ˈKAR-IB-POL-I-TAN/: [noun] 1. Term constructed from
‘Caribbean’ and the Greek root ‘polis’ which means city, citizenship or body of peo-
ple. 2. 21st century person with West Indian origin/descent living in diasporic met-
ropolitan communities such as Brooklyn’s Flatbush, Miami, Toronto’s Brampton, and
London’s Brixton. 3. Urban person with parentage from one or more Caribbean islands.
Minshall’s feelings on these issues were expressed in the *Caribbean Beat* article “Masman”: “Trinidad Carnival has entered an apparently unstoppable spiral of ‘bikini and beads’ –the triumph of money over art, the stifling of creativity by profit margins, the dwindling of once-proud traditions, and the re-segregations of Carnival along class lines.” This decline depresses Minshall, but his response has been that of any artist: “in his art” (Nicholas, Popplewell, Attila Springer). The climax for Carnival is no longer Carnival Monday and Tuesday. The performance now takes place in the expensive and elite all-inclusive fetes that happen during the preceding weeks. These VIP parties and all their exclusiveness have left out the marginalized groups. Everything has become stratified; the lower classes are not included in the festivities due to the high costs of admission and costumes. Many go into debt to just to say they were a part of the festivities and had the privilege to “wine up” on the chosen ones.

Minshall removed himself from Carnival for many years due to disappointment in the direction that Carnival was heading. He hoped that Carnival would evolve into something more fruitful and fulfilling. However, it can also be asserted that the state in which Trinidad Carnival currently finds itself speaks to the mindset of the people and communities in the country. Contemporary Carnival continues to perform the narrative of those that are now in charge of the design and the production of the craft. According to Peter Minshall,

> Our Carnival was once hugely broad in the expressions it encompassed: from let-go bacchanal to determined seriousness; from the tawdry to the magnificent; from frenzied to stately and dignified; from jump-in–the-road to clear-the-way, a mas coming; from nakedly revealed to fully disguised and transformed; from mindless to meaningful; from the self-absorbed to performance that reaches out to the pavement and the grandstand; from superficial glamour to profound drama; from rhinestones and beads and sequins to mud and bones and bush; from playing yourself to playing a mas. Now it is only bacchanal, tawdry, frenzy, jump-in–the-road, naked, mindless, self-absorbed, superficial glamour, rhinestones, beads, sequins, and playing yourself. This style, this aesthetic, so shrunken to a single dimension, now reflects little or
nothing that is original to us. It is borrowed and derivative, completely foreign—used. And the entire social and cultural discourse accepts and legitimizes this, as if it were mas, as if it were Carnival, as if it were design, as if it were always so, as if this is all that we are and all that we wish to be. (Minshall 1)

In more recent years, there have been bandleaders such as K2K and Anya Ayong Chee who have expressed that Minshall has been an inspiration to them, and they aim to create more authentic and artistic mas. After over a decade away from Carnival, Minshall reemerged in 2016. He presented a Carnival King named *The Dying Swan* that was performed by Das Nijinsky in drag as Pavlova. There was a lot of buzz surrounding this costume and presentation. It was designed with traditional moko jumbie stilts that were on pointe like a ballerina. It placed third in the King of Carnival Competition at the Queen’s Park Savannah, Port of Spain. The costume was well received and a favorite of the crowds. However, a few of Minshall’s peers and veterans of Carnival were not pleased with his presentation and his placement in the competition. Marcus Eustance, quoted in an article in the *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, saw “Minshall’s high placing as ridiculous. Put it this way, if you call that mas, how would it look if next year everybody play moko jumbie. That is not a mas. That is why the stands are empty. You have people building all kinds of expensive costumes and they coming tenth and eleventh, and a moko jumbie comes third” (Achong). Whether or not one agrees with Eustance, Minshall did what he is credited for. He designed and created a beautiful piece of art that was performed and generated conversation and controversy. Peter Minshall will forever be the people’s choice.
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BATTERED BODIES, ACHING SOULS: THE REPRESENTATION OF PAIN IN MALIKA BOOKER’S PEPPER SEED

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Abstract
In this essay, I discuss various notions of the expression of pain and the (re)construction of bodily images in British-Caribbean writer Malika Booker’s (2013) Pepper Seed. I analyze three main topics: (a) the depiction of the woman’s body as fragmented and battered, (b) the images of physical (external) and emotional (internal) pain, and (c) the language of pain, using the sounds of English and Creole. I argue that her work becomes a metaphor not only of individual women themselves, but also of an ailing society, of the collective body.

Keywords: Caribbean poetry, pain, body, women, Malika Booker

Resumen
En este ensayo, discuto varias nociones sobre la expresión del dolor y la (re)construcción de imágenes corpóreas en el poemario Pepper Seed (2013) de la escritora británica-caribeña Malika Booker. Analizo tres temas principales: (a) la representación del cuerpo femenino fragmentado y abatido, (b) las imágenes de dolor físico (externo) y emocional (interno), y (c) el lenguaje del dolor, expresado mediante los sonidos del inglés y del criollo. Propongo que su trabajo se convierte en una metáfora no solo de mujeres individuales, sino además de una sociedad, de un cuerpo colectivo adolorido.

Palabras clave: poesía caribeña, dolor, cuerpo, Malika Booker
Malika Booker’s first poetry collection, *Pepper Seed*, published by Pelpal Tree Press in 2013, gives voice to the personal and social realities of women who become deeply wounded at both a physical and an emotional level. Her verses recreate various images of the body—and the soul—in pain, thus taking after earlier Caribbean female poets, such as Lorna Goodison and Mahadai Das (deCaires Narain, *Contemporary* 148 et seq.). However, her work is full of blatantly and purposefully raw descriptions, which remind her readers that “The truth is not a love poem” (Booker 9). The intensity of Booker’s poetry has motivated me to explore three major topics in this essay: (a) the depiction of the woman’s body, (b) the images of physical and emotional pain, and (c) the language of pain. I argue that the poet’s representation of individual women, their bodies, and the pain inflicted on or associated with them acts as a metaphor of the experiences of women—in the plural, collective, sense—and of Caribbean history, in general. Thereby, the impact of her words—that is, the words of the speakers and protagonists of each poem, whom she brings to life—becomes a source of empowerment, a tool for debunking prevalent stereotypes associated with women, as well as a path for individual and collective healing.

(*Re*)Writing The Woman’s Body

“Bodies exist within social and cultural contexts and hence are also constructed through sociocultural practices and discourses” (Fredrickson & Roberts 174). Throughout history, especially in the patriarchal Western tradition, the woman’s body has been the object of admiration and idealization, as recreated in numerous art forms, including literature itself. Moreover, in today’s globalized and commercialized world, the female body is constructed through fetishized images, which convey an illusion of beauty and perfection, thus setting unreachable standards (Fredrickson & Roberts 180). From a critical perspective, however, it is essential that we ask the following question, posed by Bordo: “When did ‘perfection’ become applicable to a human body?” (xvii). The majority—if not all—of the poems in *Pepper Seed* seem to address this very ques-
tion. Further, the answer quickly becomes evident, as the author challenges—or, rather, shatters—this and many other commonly held misconceptions.

In fact, some of the most intimate poems in Booker’s collection portray a disjointed and fragmented body, as they single out different parts reminiscent of women’s biological constitution, such as the womb, the hips, the breasts, and the external genitalia. On the one hand, it is possible to associate the explicit mention of such body parts with the objectification of women’s bodies that is also found in abundance in film, media, music, and popular culture, which takes place “whenever a woman’s body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated out of her person” (Fredrickson & Roberts 175). Nevertheless, Booker’s work does not simply mirror this kind of dismemberment, which may still be consistent with the idea of perfection described in the preceding lines. Rather, she makes her readers consider trauma to the body and psyche in a very intimate and shocking way. She distorts the stereotypical notions of maternity and sexuality, which are most likely associated with sexual organs, thus creating and simultaneously defying fractured images of the individual and the collective body, as the next few examples suggest.

My mother tells me, *Your womb will dry and shrivel up.*
I dance through life, deaf,
no child planned in my party. (43)

In this stanza from the poem “Prayer,” the task of maternity is represented solely by the womb, thus alienating it from the rest of the woman’s body, and making reference not to the person as a whole, but to this emblematic body part. Moreover, since the speaker’s womb has not yet served its “natural” purpose, it is described as being close to drying up. This may serve as an example of how patriarchal views, also internalized and reproduced by women (Fredrickson & Roberts 177 et seq.), influence—and, sometimes, dictate—the roles associated with women’s bodies, body parts, and their functions. However, the speaker in this same stanza assumes a defiant attitude towards her mother’s expectations, which may represent repressive dominant ideologies at the societal level. She makes clear that she is not willing to fulfill this imposed role of motherhood, nor does she approve of being referred to by means of a single body part. In contrast, she reclaims her individual identity and reconstitutes her wholeness through the use of the pronoun *I.* While her mother refers to
her with the sole mention of her womb, she talks about herself without reference to any specific body part. Furthermore, she employs words such as “dancing,” through which she evokes an image of her whole body as a site of movement, of activity, of agency, thus achieving a greater rejection of objectification and dismemberment.

In “Sestina for Grenada,” Booker presents a very different image of motherhood, in which the referent is no longer an adult woman who refuses to carry a child in her womb, but young women, teenagers, who become mothers earlier than what is socially expected or acceptable. As exemplified below, this poem emphasizes other characteristics of women’s biological constitution as well:

Here schoolgirls’ bodies ripen like fruit
to be plucked by grown men lusting for island
hips to stake in dark pastures and season
with sperm till their breasts swell. Naïve girls
unable to block nutmeg babies from men on heat,
who long to swim in all kind of fresh water (27)

Here, the maternal body is fused with the sexual body, the adolescent or pubescent body, which is not typically associated with motherhood. Booker, thus, presents a contradiction: whereas grown women’s wombs are empty and shrunken up, naïve and unprepared young girls’ wombs bear babies, but not necessarily due to a conscious decision of embracing maternity. Rather, these girls seem to fall victim to the predator behavior of male tourists who “season” them sexually. The choice by Booker of the word “season,” a historically charged word which refers to a violent process of a slave owner or overseer trying to break the will and resistance of an enslaved African, shows the ties between the equally objectionable and horrible actions of a European overseer who raped African women and the tourists who sexually lust after young Caribbean girls.

Further, the girls’ bodies, their breasts, their hips, are compared to fruit. On the one hand, this analogy is reminiscent of women being equated to nature and all that is natural (Bordo 21). But the fact which deserves the most attention is that this fruit is presented as ready to be eaten—or, most likely, devoured—by men. As deCaires Narain explains, the Caribbean—especially, the black woman’s body—is associated with fullness, fecundity, and sexual desire (“Body Talk” 262). In its sexual role, then, the woman’s body is still the object of aggression, of repression, since there is no reference to pleasure whatsoever.
On the contrary, the body as a whole becomes a product. By means of these representations, which also make reference to the type of commodification and fetishism advertised by the media (Fredrickson & Roberts 175), Booker puts forth an effective critique of mainstream prevalent discourses.

Additional references to female sexual activity and sexual organs can be found in “Red Ants Bite.” Throughout this poem, women's external genitalia—perhaps the most overtly sexual body part—are linked to prostitution, as in the following excerpt, in which the speaker is evidently traumatized and tormented by her grandmother’s words:

You will end up on your back, scunt spread out
feet sprawl out, whoring Who tells a child that?

I can't talk past the word buried deep,
can't talk past the men I froze beneath,
your words branded under the skin
inside my thighs, legs spread like a whore. (10, 12-13)

Different from the previous example of “Sestina for Grenada,” which described women's/girls' sexual activity outside of the home in relation to adult men's predator behavior, here the home becomes, precisely, the main setting for the reproduction of violent ideologies and stereotypes. Hence, the dismemberment of women's body and self-esteem is represented as coming from the inside, as part of family relationships. As stated by deCaires Narain, “[a] woman’s body… is often associated with pain and anxiety, and the home as the context within which the repressive drama surrounding the woman's body is enacted” (Contemporary 149). In fact, even as an adult, the speaker in this poem admits that she has not been able to overcome the trauma experienced during childhood, which has shaped her own perspective about her body. Her grandmother’s prophecy does not only affect the speaker’s emotions and sense of self-appreciation, but, in the long run, it also hinders her freedom of action and adversely influences her capability of making decisions about her body. This situation is applicable at a general level, since it illustrates the way in which widespread internalized discourses about women’s bodies can ultimately take control over their own desires, their own will. This is tied to a very powerful statement by Catharine McKinnon: “Women's sexuality is, socially, a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered, or exchanged by others. But women never own or possess it” (49).
Images of Physical and Emotional Pain

Internal and external wounds are often inseparable, as explained thus far. When inflicted on someone's body, pain may certainly leave psychological traces; similarly, great sorrow or anger may induce physical symptoms of pain. In Pepper Seed, both manifestations become deeply intertwined, at the point of being almost indistinguishable from each other. And, sadly, many of these wounds are caused by very close people, who are expected to be nurturing and protective.

Indeed, “Pepper Sauce,” one of the most scarring of Booker’s poems, deals with an extreme form of abuse perpetrated at home. After finding out that her granddaughter has stolen from her, Anne’s grandmother decides to prepare a very hot pepper sauce with the help of her unsuspecting granddaughter, and then to “scoop that pepper sauce out of a white enamel bowl, / and pack it deep into she granddaughter’s pussy” (15). After describing this atrocious punishment, Booker faces the reader with the image of this girl, screaming until she is out of strength, out of words, out of breath: “I hear how she couldn’t walk or talk for weeks” (11). Her pain is no longer only physical, since it also turns into an emotional trauma. As suggested by Scarry: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). This destruction of words is, at the same time, a metaphor for confusion, for a loss of identity. As pain takes over her body, not only are her words destroyed, but the girl’s sense of self and awareness of her surroundings also become shattered.

On the other hand, given the intensifying rhythm of the poem, the reader is almost able to physically feel Anne’s pain, as thoughts and feelings collide and merge together. Moreover, the anaphoric use of the clause “I hear” resembles the agitated, gossipy, sensationalist, voice of an outsider (a neighbor, perhaps?) telling and dramatizing the latest piece of news. These stylistic effects both capture the readers’ attention and let them into the story, thereby turning the personal into political, and the private into public.

Private and public events are also fused in “Minetta Speaks,” but, this time, it is a historical account, the collective trauma of sexual exploitation during slavery, which is explored by way of a very intimate narrative, one that becomes
an echo of the suffering experienced by many women of that period: “I lie real still / and stiff, hands clenched, toes curled –inside is war” (18). Rape, defined as unwanted, unconsensual, and abusive intercourse, constitutes “an act of cutting, of dividing the flesh, destroying its wholeness, hence the subject. It alienates the victim from herself and is meant to do so” (Bal 20, emphasis by the author). This implies that a physical violation does not only bruise the body, but the victim as a whole, whose emotions and conception of self are broken. In fact, the history of colonization in the Caribbean is full of violence, as Europeans “took possession” (Greenblatt) of the land and the people they enslaved. Acts of aggression and penetration of the woman’s body can be found since the planting of the flag, both literally and metaphorically. Booker captures these realities and integrates them into a cohesive story which is no longer private or public; it is both at the same time. In fact, by titling her poem “Minetta Speaks,” it is not just Minetta who breaks her own silence; she speaks for her ancestors, her family members, her descendants, her friends; she speaks for thousands of women of her period; and, conversely, all of these women speak through this one character, Minetta.

Emotional pain is a result of historical legacies and contemporary realities. For instance, the loss of loved ones separated by migration causes extreme sorrow, which, combined with feelings of regret, emptiness, and loneliness, may have physical manifestations, as suggested in the final stanza of ‘Aunty Rita:’

Poor Maliks raced across the globe to be at your side, but you left too soon, now she will forever arrive too late to comfort her ailing loves before they die. Poor headless chicken, dragging her heavy body in the dirt, every time they tell her, You are too late. … (71)

In this piece, the author portrays long-distance family relationships as a source of internal pain. The protagonist, Maliks (reminiscent of the author, so it is assumed that she refers to herself by using a shortened version of her name) experiences the weight of at least two sources of pain: that of her loved one’s passing and, the one that hurts the most, being “too late”—and too far away—to say goodbye. The effects of this emotional distress become physical, as Booker continuously recreates the image of the dismembered and wailing body—this time, not even a human body— that wanders from one place to another. The
woman who feels pain is no longer whole. She can no longer walk; her feet cannot raise from the ground. Rather, because of her deep, internal wounds, she drags herself, with great burden. The body in pain is weakened, inside and out. As explained by Scarry, “[e]motional pain can sometimes be so severe that it approaches the kinds of features that come about in physical pain” (in Smith 225).

**THE SOUNDS OF PAIN**

Booker communicates all kinds of pain not only through visual images and the content of her poems, but also through her linguistic choices. In this section, I focus on some of the sound and style effects that she achieves through her selection of lexical items in English and in Creole.

Pain is commonly described as standing in opposition to language, either as having no language of expression other than silence, or as representing a threat to language, as suggested by Elaine Scarry and Susan Mary Ferguson. The latter argues that “pain is both here and not here. An integral part of our daily lives as embodied beings, and also a space of silence and absence” (Ferguson 1). Nonetheless, I will argue that pain is also conveyed through the sounds of language, whether in isolation or in combination with others. Furthermore, these sounds obviously often complement the meanings transmitted through words.

I will first make reference to a group of sounds called *plosives* or *stops* in phonology. These are consonantal phonemes articulated by the complete closure (occlusion) of the vocal tract, followed by a rapid release of air when the mouth is opened again. The impact made by the air while bursting out is comparable to an explosion, hence the name *plosive*. English has six plosive phonemes: /p, t, k, b, d, g/, all of which are deftly employed by Booker to disturb the musicality of the verses, and thus to express pain and aggression. These impose a hard rhythm on the verses, comparable to the act of punching or fist-pounding. They epitomize the kind of pain that bruises up the body.

On the other hand, the author also takes advantage of the deafening sound of sibilants and their constant hissing. Fricative phonemes, such as /s/, are produced by the release of air through a narrow opening at the vocal tract. Because the tip or blade of the tongue is close to the roof of the mouth, they produce a strident sound. This effect may serve to communicate some sort of deflation of the self, or even a burning kind of pain, one which cuts like lashes into the skin.
Moreover, when these two types of sounds are put together at the onset of a syllable, as in the next example from ‘Exodus,’ a different result is yielded: “She stutters, stops, starts…” (36). Here, the continuous flow of the fricative, along with its hissing sibilant sound, is abruptly interrupted by the occlusion of the /t/. This is reminiscent of stagnation, insecurity, impotence, confusion, and instability. It, therefore, completes the meaning of the poem, which tells the story of an immigrant who feels lost at a new place which she cannot call home, and who is later arrested due to her “illegal” status.

On the other hand, the author also articulates pain through the use of Creole—or, further, nation language, a term coined by Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite. Although Booker does not employ Creole in all of her poems, whenever she does, it helps to convey a sense of community, of shared pain. At the same time, it represents the voice of the oppressed—and, as such, it also serves to exclude the “official” (i.e., standard) voice, thus acting as a means of asserting in-group identity and freedom from the oppressor, the “Other.” In fact, linguist Peter Roberts describes language (in this case, Creole varieties in the Caribbean) as “a unifying force in the face of hostility” (384). As an example of the latter, I provide an excerpt of “Heathrow Airport Immigration 2007:”

> When she hear say alla dem haffi go back, Charlene start feel like dark knight.  
> yet it never sink in till she start see people beg and sob, fi her stomach drop till it meet her big toe… (35)

This piece captures the reality of a planeload of Caribbean illegal immigrants to the United Kingdom who were sent back home after being stopped at the airport by the British police. As seen above, the story is told through Charlene, a character who embodies the suffering of all of her people. Like in many other poems, Booker merges public and personal experiences, as well as emotional and physical manifestations of pain (e.g., Charlene’s body is bent over itself). In addition, her choice to employ Creole is both a tool for the unification of the oppressed and the subsequent confrontation with the oppressor. At a deeper level, it may be interpreted as a rejection of—or a challenge to—the establishment, the status quo.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

In summation, throughout my analysis, I have explored different –yet related– notions of the expression of pain and the construction of bodily images in Malika Booker’s *Pepper Seed*. Each verse takes the reader on a voyage through history, as it portrays the unspoken and unspeakable stories of women –African women, Caribbean women, and immigrant women– who suffer lacerating experiences that come from various sources and leave marks on their bodies and souls. In addition, her work captures the symptoms of an ailing society, as the pain transcends the individual and affects the collective body (or *bodies*). Booker represents all of these themes with great attention to detail, aesthetics, and language.

On the other hand, frank explorations of women’s capacity to bear pain, although not a cause of celebration, also serve to demystify traditional literary notions of masculinity and maleness being built on this stereotype, as suggested by Christopher Forth. Further, albeit it goes beyond my discussion, Booker presents women not only as being the recipients of violence, but also as the reproducers of it, thus contributing to an infinite cycle of aggression. Hence, her work both uncovers and challenges traditional (mis)conceptions and behaviors enforced by patriarchal philosophy in the Western world and internalized by its own victims.

Finally, *Pepper Seed* gives the woman’s body-in-pain center stage. She purposefully produces stark contrasts with the seemingly perfect and idealized female body presented in the arts and the media, thus debunking all associated stereotypes. However, the hard images of physical, emotional, private, and public pain do not merely capture traumatic realities, but also attempt to change them. Writing about trauma is, in itself, a healing activity for both the writer and the reader, as demonstrated in psychoanalysis. “Writing is more than a defense –an asylum or refuge into which one can withdraw–it is also an armor one puts on to do battle” (Harris 19). It is a tool for freedom, be it autobiographical or fictional, since it usually bears some links to reality, as discussed in this analysis of Booker’s poetry collection. Throughout this work, readers are constantly confronted and brought into feeling empathy for the speakers. This empathy, nonetheless, is not to be confused with pity, since perhaps the strongest emotion generated by the poems is indignation, which is eventually
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(hopefully) translated into action, into the will to make the world a better place, starting with ourselves and with those who surround us. Instead of it being like rubbing a muddy finger on a wound, it is like patting it with alcohol: it may burn, but it certainly advances the healing process.
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Abstract
This essay offers a critical reading of and commentary on Willie Perdomo’s poem “Have it Your Way: Combo” against the backdrop of Puerto Rico’s current political and economic crisis. In particular, it explores the possibilities of political subversion present in Perdomo’s work as hopeful and urgent “objects of thought.” These are presented as alternatives for the cynical and defeatist manner in which Puerto Rican intellectuals consider public issues in contemporary Puerto Rico.

Keywords: Willie Perdomo, contemporary Puerto Rican literature, revolution, politics, Nuyorican poetry

Resumen
Este ensayo ofrece una lectura crítica del poema “Have it Your Way: Combo” del poeta nuyorican Willie Perdomo, a la luz de la actual crisis política y económica en Puerto Rico. En particular, se discuten aquí las posibilidades de subversión política cifradas en los tropos e imágenes en la obra poética de Perdomo. El poema se lee como una alternativa a la forma cínica y derrotista en la que intelectuales puertorriqueños/as atienden los asuntos públicos en el Puerto Rico contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: Willie Perdomo, literatura puertorriqueña, revolución, política, poesía nuyorican
ONE WAY

In their October 21st 2015 exposé on Puerto Rico, titled “The Puerto Rico Gamble,” Aljazeera America included footage of a protest staged by the local grassroots movement Acción de Pueblo. Cameras show some one hundred people walking towards the Governor’s mansion in Old San Juan, dragging along suitcases under the sun, over the cobblestoned streets. The show’s producers, however, neglected to mention that the scene was in fact part of a protest calling for the exile of politicians and hedge funders. Thus, for a casual viewer, the images of protestors with their suitcases could very well blend in with those of travelers at the airport saying goodbye to their families. The program highlights how these goodbyes have become a painful quotidian ritual as islanders are migrating at alarming rates in hopes of finding better work and life opportunities in the US.

Close to 155,000 people migrated from Puerto Rico to the US between January 2014 and June 2015 (Redacción, 2016). The situation, as portrayed by local mainstream media outlets, is considered to be even more worrisome insomuch as those fleeing are (allegedly) mostly young, educated professionals. As such, Puerto Rico is often presented as slowly but surely becoming a bastion of the old and the poor (Laureano, 2013). (Editor’s note: 2017 hurricanes Irma and Maria have exacerbated this situation).

Puerto Rican intellectuals from abroad have broached this issue in an effort to problematize and expand the public discussion on the possible reasons for and conditions under which the present wave of PR-US migration is taking place. Australian-based writer Miguel Rodríguez-Casellas (2013), for example, has argued that Puerto Rican society is riddled with patterns of exclusion on both formal and informal levels that serve to silence dissent on all fronts. From this author’s perspective, everybody in Puerto Rico is ultimately complicit in the political and cultural debacle:

All conversations in Puerto Rico have a very limited scope. Those who talk know they are under another’s surveillance, whose interests are unknown, but one suspects that they are interrelated with some sector or sphere of power. Therefore, anything that is said is potentially polemical. This unleashes cycles of tumultuous extremism. Or there is absolute noise, or there is absolute (and careful) silence.
Similarly, University of Maryland professor and poet Juan Carlos Quintero-Herencia (2016) highlights the alleged inability among progressive activist circles to deal wholeheartedly with urgent public issues without having serious debates and discussions devolve into a type of radicalism Olympics, where interlocutors struggle to one-up the other in terms of their commitment to a particular cause, or the self-proclaimed progressiveness of their political views. In this sense, for both writers, Puerto Rico is a hostile space for the exchange of thoughts and ideas—and therefore, for the building of organized, collective movements of opposition to the status quo—insomuch as competition trumps conversation and/or one’s interlocutors are always somebody else’s spies.

These stark views correspond with those of internationally acclaimed writer and University of Puerto Rico professor Eduardo Lalo, who posits that Puerto Ricans are inherently divisive and therefore incapable of fostering sound community life (2014). Lalo, actually, has offered readers—across his many op-ed pieces published in a number of local digital and print journals over the last few years—an inventory of the seemingly inescapable failures and shortcomings of Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rican society as a whole. For him, the colonial condition is the fundamental (and oftentimes, the exclusive) element of Puerto Rican subjectivity. As such, every issue he touches upon—from governmental corruption, to media alarmism and misdirection, to racial prejudice, to the lack of a vibrant political culture—always comes down to Puerto Rico’s colonial status. In this sense, Lalo’s writing is not so much a practice of inquiry or invention, as it is a diagnosis. And, in the case of the Puerto Rican people, the diagnosis is always the same: If we are too complaisant or too divided or too inefficient in handling our affairs, or even, in talking about beginning to handle our own affairs, it is because we are colonized subjects and nothing we do escapes, however briefly, that reality.

It is my contention that some things do in fact manage to, albeit precariously and minutely, escape this reality. A quick survey of the most recent poetry and fiction publications by contemporary Puerto Rican writers, both within and beyond our borders, would most certainly yield a wide range of scenes and imagery suggestive of more radical, progressive political formulations of communal life in Puerto Rico. Fiction like Rafael Acevedo’s Guaya Guaya (2012) and Luis Negrón’s Mundo Crueł (2010), as well as poetry by Mara Pas-
tor (2010), and Xavier Valcárcel (2012), all offer glimpses into more egalitarian forms of communal living, armed revolutionary struggle and/or manifestations of individual and collective identities, based on solidarity across diverse groups that arises from a sincere engagement with the global south. An engagement, one could argue, of the sort envisioned by Salman Rushdie, when addressing the relationship between writers and their native lands. Rushdie (34) writes: “When imagination is given sight by passion, it sees darkness as well as light. To feel so ferociously is to feel contempt as well as pride, hatred as well as love. These proud contempts, this hating love, often earn the writer a nation’s wrath. The nation requires anthems, flags. The poet offers discord. Rags.”

In the case of Puerto Rico, the nation—until very recently—has offered nothing but rags to its diasporic community. Particularly, it has cast aside Nuyorican and other US Puerto Rican writers from the friendly confines of the national literary canon. This exclusion has been based mostly on issues of language, race, and social class, and antiquated notions of cultural authenticity. Nuyorican writers, in turn, have replied with moving portrayals of Puerto Rican communal life outside our archipelago, as well as with scathing critiques of the hatred and contradictions inherent in islanders’ historical refusal to claim Nuyorican literature as a part of national literature. Few Nuyorican writers, however, have engaged the Puerto Rican socio-political and cultural space as Willie Perdomo does in his most recent poetry collection The Essential Hits of Shorty Bon Bon (2014)—particularly in the nine-part poem “Have it Your Way: Combo,” which chronicles the imagined visit of a Nuyorican percussionist to present day Puerto Rico.

In the following section, I will freely riff on this poem in an effort to explore the realm of possibilities it offers with regard to new, politically radical ways in which to imagine Puerto Rico as a key site of resistance and subversion.

Another

Part five of “Have It Your Way: Combo” opens with some friendly but stern advise for the Nuyorican visitor, as he readies for his musical debut: “Now remember: your conjugation game/ Needs to be tight. It’s true: Puerto Ricans/ Love for free & coquis are almost extinct./ When the set opens remember how Albizu/ Blasted yanqui go home with that me cago/ En la madre que te parió
Spanish-speaking readers, at first, may wonder as to the accuracy of the translation in the second line: is it that Puerto Ricans love for free, or do they love freely? “Se te quiere de gratis,” one might say in a murmur as one rereads the line. “For free,” definitely. Once that’s settled, it’s easy to skip the part about the coquis and focus on the lesson’s “logical” progression—conjugation, local idioms, local knowledge, revolution. From the poet’s perspective, the visitor must master all four in order to survive the set. Or is it the entire stay? Here Perdomo echoes Derek Walcott’s “Tropic Zone,” where Puerto Rico is portrayed by the poet as a danger zone, on account of the many residues of a revolutionary violence. Walcott writes:

A rusty sparrow alights on a rustier rain gauge/ in the front garden, but every squeak addresses/ me in testy Spanish. “Change to a light shirt. A/ walk on our beach should teach you our S’s/ as the surf says them. You’ll recognize hovels, rotting fishnets. Also a white dory was shot/ for being a gringo. I go back upstairs,/ for so much here is the Empire envied and hated/ that whether one chooses to say “ven-thes” or “ven-

“Tropic Zone” is riddled with images of otherwise imperceptible clashes between the colonizer and the colonized that take place daily in Puerto Rico. While these clashes may no longer be bloody, they are no less violent: “Above hot tin billboards, above Hostería del Mar,/ wherever the Empire has raised the standard of living/ by blinding high rises, gestures are made to the culture/ of a remorseful past, whose artists must stay unforgiving/ even when commissioned” (498). For Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá (144), Walcott’s poem highlights the “vulnerability of a society that attempts to glorify ancestral times marked by humiliation and pillaging.”

2 My translation.
people on the street that sincerely believe that they will win—“vene re mos”; 4) The difference between “vendes” and “vences” is more vital than the difference between “ser” and “estar”; 5) And yes, you better change to a light shirt. Yet, for some reason, this escapes most onlookers, both local and foreign. Walcott writes: “as is the case with so many revolutions,/ the visitor doubts the murals and trusts the beer” (498). Perdomo is no tourist in this regard— “When the set opens remember how Albizu/ Blasted yanqui go home” (49).

As it pertains to trusting the beer, however, there are countless reasons to seriously doubt the political potentialities of colonial Puerto Rico in the present day. Among them, islanders’ presumed inability, referenced in the previous section, to openly and critically discuss political issues. Kevin Anthony González, in his poem “How to Survive in America’s Last Colony,” seems to pay homage to that defeatist vision of a society whose members must abandon any serious hope of collective action:

Every day in Puerto/ Rico,/ we perch our arms like surrendered weapons atop the/ same bar; every day we come home to the same stuffed poli- tics/ steaming on the table. When a tourist looks up from/ his meda- lion/ & tosses an ice cube, the dogs will fight for it, that/ hollow medal/ of charity, & bark for more. Here, you will want to/ speak of redemp- tion./ Here, you will want to drop your own politics/ like an eggcrate. Don’t. Instead, glance once more at/ the sign,/ clutch your beer & drop two bills on the bar,/ that mecca of sedatives: Bacardi, Barreliot, Palo Viejo, Ron/ Rico./ Drive off into rural Puerto Rico, sip your Medalla/ & remember belief can never be barred. Plunge into the red/ speech of the sun. Forget all the signs. Let cool be your/ politics (56-57).

“Cool” in the context of this poem is anything but political insomuch as it arises from the seeming impossibility of even establishing a dialogue on politics. Cool, here, is reminiscent of Rodriguez-Casellas’ and Quintero-Herencia’s takes on the Puerto Rican condition and signals a withdrawal to the private sphere of the individual because, according to the poet, it is simply not worth it to engage the issues aloud, for outsiders have taken over public space and there is no other recourse but to retreat to the privacy of one’s own beliefs. Beliefs, fortunately “can never be barred,” but neither can they be of any significant social consequence, stuck inside one’s head. Therefore, there is no cool as such. But rather, in González’s work, cool is cool with the status quo.
Fortunately, Perdomo offers the reader a coolness of a different sort—a penchant for irreverence, imagination, and play when broaching the serious matter of colonialism. The first section of “Have It Your Way: Combo” finds the Nuyorican visitor lighting a joint in El Morro to greet Christopher Columbus:

When Columbus steps ashore, you call him/ Negrito, you say, Take off the brim, lose the/ Doublet, get rid of the girdle—it’s hot, bro./ And you being the Paseo Boricua that you/ Are, the dirt-eating Ponceña that you are,/ The Don Filiberto that you are, the che-che-/ Colé that you are, the thirty seconds it takes/ To steal a car that you are, the olive-skin/ Buddhist pop star that you are, will pass/ Columbus the blunt & tell him to take a hit/ Before Government is shut down for the day. (SBB 35)

Here, the marijuana high enables Perdomo to offer a very intriguing rewrite of Puerto Rican history: the Spanish colonizers are greeted by the Nuyorican, who has been recast as native inhabitant. Thus, the island, as it is about to be colonized by the Spaniards, already bears the marks of its future American colonization—governmental inefficiency, migration and exile, subversion and illegality. What is intriguing here is the picture of the colonized as a “know-it-all,” evidenced in the cool and matter of fact tone with which the colonizer is greeted. Negrito, he says, you are not going to survive in this heat dressed like that. Negrito, he says, knowing full well, which historical characters do in fact survive. Negrito, he says, in reference to Pedro Pietri’s classic poem “Puerto Rican Obituary,” where to be called negrito means to be called love. Only this time, negrito, while possibly signaling an intimacy with the colonizer, does not demand to be read as a term of affection. It could be read, rather, as an indication of the speaker’s complete control of the encounter, for the Nuyorican as native is impervious to the pain and suffering that Columbus and his kind will inflict because his ancestors and him have already lived through it. And that too is a historical fact.

Now, once the poet comes down from that high, he no longer inhabits Puerto Rican land as native, but travels down San Juan city streets, as visitor in the back of a taxicab. The scenery is to die for:

At the most notorious intersection in/ Santurce, Anacaona sits under a palm/ Tree & picks sarcoma off her cheeks./ When she spots your
taxicab, she dips/ A sloppy open back to outside turn &/ Breaks into a rumba of “Jingle Bells.”/ She presses a super-sized Burger King/ Cup against your window. Her eyes are/ Spook-hollow, her habit trimester- big;/ Crocodile tears beg epidemic chip-ins./ The turístico eats a red light, silences/ You back to Creation, and before you/ Can leave him a tip, he opens a décima:/ When for sale stops lying to Paradise./ When Paradise says, Enough, no más—/ Land goes free, blood black, and brother,/ You just ain’t ready for that kind of noise. (SBB 36)

Upon reading these verses, one might be tempted to translate back into Spanish the opening lines of the cab driver’s décima. This, after realizing that there is no such thing as “eating” a red light; at least not in English. Cab drivers, if anything, would run them. It’s a literal translation from the Spanish that, however briefly, threatens to render the verse senseless. But before the reader fully realizes this, the décima has already begun: “Cuando Se Vende le deja de mentir al Paraíso/ Cuando el Paraíso dice basta, no más—/ El terreno se va de gratis, la sangre se torna negra, y hermano/ Tú no estás listo para ese tipo de ruido.” Reading over the lines of the “original” Spanish version, one notices that they are almost as senseless as a cab driver “eating” a red light. The futility of this brief translation exercise suggests that Perdomo does not take in elements, fragments of conversation overheard in the Spanish-speaking space he inhabits and then translates them into English. Rather, it is as if the poet picks up on, senses subtle, untapped potentialities of articulation along the landscape. He then renders these as lines of poetry in their “original” English language.

What is particularly important here is that these potentialities of articulation seem to be latent with political meaning—a subtle mood, or slight shifts in the wind that Perdomo seems to be uniquely able to perceive and engage. In this sense, he brings to mind Anne Waldman’s take on poets and their relationship to the larger human community. According to Waldman (42): “Poets don’t claim to be enlightened curanderos, but sometimes, making themselves available as antennae of the race, they might receive or tap into energy sources we are usually impervious to.” What Puerto Ricans appear to be impervious to is the possibility of subversion that is still present in the many facets of everyday life.

As such, the energy sources that surround Perdomo in the archipelago of his poetic imagination suggest that not all weapons have been surrendered,
and that not everything in Puerto Rico’s present condition refers us back to a
history of humiliation and pillaging. It refers us, on the one hand, to historical
contradictions, remixed and rearticulated over time: “First Tuesday skin-
bleached/ Morenas, metrosexual eyebrows/ Threaded to filament, free/ Bomba
clinics, machetes/ Made of wood, cobblestone/ Gleam & vejigante tricks” (SBB
43). And on the other, it refers us to such a plausible and immediate future that
most islanders cannot even fathom it: “On the flight back home/ You dream of
Isla Madre:/ She walks into the nearest/ Precinct, strapped head-to-/ Achilles
in dynamite &/ Demands that the San/ Juan Ritz-Carlton casino/ Return all
her SSI checks” (SBB 43).

It is in these final lines that the potentialities of rebellion that abound in
“Have it Your Way: Combo” acquire their most intriguing and urgent form.
They are given the precise content and context: Who else in a place soon to be
inhabited almost exclusively by the elderly and poor would rebel if not the el-
derly and poor themselves? What else would they demand if not what has been
taken away from them in a supposedly legitimate way? How else would they
fight back if not in small, ridiculous, and extremely risky acts? What else would
be at stake in their rebellion if not the meager amount of a single supplemental
security income check? And their lives, of course, along with the remote pos-
sibility of crafting a dramatically different society.

According to Jacques Rancière (32): “[u]nequal society does not carry an
equal society in its womb. Rather, egalitarian society is only ever the set of
egalitarian relations that are traced here and now through singular and pre-
carious acts.” The old woman threatening to blow up the precinct in the poet’s
dream is a precarious act./ As is the dreaming./ As is the possibility of such a
dream to be turned into poetry and read by a diverse and disperse collectivity of
readers and dreamers in Puerto Rico and beyond,/ so that the dream becomes a
point of contact among them. /So that if and when, an old lady actually walks
into a police precinct, threatening to blow it up,/ they will recognize the event
for what it is—a revolution./ A tiny one, undoubtedly./ But a revolution just
the same.
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THE PATHOLOGY OF SEX AND THE DOMESTICATION OF DESIRE IN ZEE EDGELL’S IN TIMES LIKE THESE

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Abstract
Pavana Leslie, the protagonist of Zee Edgell’s In Times Like These, is a single mother who, upon her return to her native Belize, struggles to manage her feelings at the renewed contact with her children’s father, Alex Abrams. The helplessness that characterizes Pavana’s desire for Alex is only one of the registers in which sex functions in the novel as—especially for women—a powerfully destructive force. This essay argues that what the novel frames as Pavana’s achievement of emotional autonomy and political maturity through conquering her own desire is significantly compromised by her refusal of solidarity with other single mothers, and by a broader thematic landscape in which sex is rendered as pathology.

Keywords: Caribbean novel, feminism, Caribbean women writers, Caribbean politics, Zee Edgell

Resumen
Pavana Leslie, la protagonista de la novela In Times Like These de Zee Edgell, es una madre soltera quien al regresar a su país de origen, Belize, intenta manejar sus sentimientos al encontrarse nuevamente con el padre de sus hijos, Alex Abrams. La impotencia que caracteriza el deseo de Pavana por Alex es tan solo uno de los registros donde el sexo funciona en la novela—especialmente para la mujer—como una poderosa fuerza destructiva. Este ensayo argumenta que lo que la novela propone como el logro de Pavana al obtener una autonomía emocional y madurez política a través de dominar sus propios deseos, está afectado significativamente por rehusar ser solidaria con otras madres solteras y a través de un panorama más amplio donde el sexo es dictado como patológico.

Palabras clave: novela caribeña, feminismo, escritoras caribeñas, políticas caribeñas, Zee Edgell
Zee Edgell’s second novel, *In Times Like These* (1991), is set in Belize’s tumultuous pre-independence moment. The protagonist, Pavana Leslie, finds herself entangled in the political turmoil of the time both through her acceptance of a controversial government position (with the newly-formed Women’s Unit) and through her history with Alex Abrams, now a rising political star. Pavana has returned home from many years abroad, intending to introduce her twin teenaged children to Alex, the father who has thus far been unaware of their existence. The helpless intensity with which the younger Pavana experiences, and the older Pavana recalls, her romantic connection to Alex is only one of the registers in which sex and desire function in the novel as a powerful and powerfully destructive force. Specifically, sex serves as a reliable index of masculine power in the novel, especially for high-status men; conversely, and almost uniformly, it signals feminine vulnerability and failure. I argue here that what the novel frames as Pavana’s achievement of emotional autonomy and political maturity through conquering her own desire is significantly problematized— even entirely compromised— by her refusal of solidarity with other single mothers, and by a broader thematic landscape in which sex is rendered, primarily, as pathology.

My thoughts here are informed by Donette Francis’s salutary reminder about “the political significance of the intimate sphere as a cornerstone of imperialists’ and nationalists’ projects and thus the private sphere’s importance to understandings of colonial and postcolonial subjectivity and citizenship” (1-2). Francis later calls “the sexual lives of Caribbean people … central to colonial and postcolonial articulations of citizenship” (2, my emphasis). Further—like Faith Smith, and others—Francis takes note of a long literary tradition in which Caribbean women’s bodies, and their sexual choices and experiences, are the symbolic territory on which masculinist colonial and anti-colonial projects are discursively mapped, and fought over. Within this context, Caribbean women writing Caribbean women’s sexuality is an act fraught with revolutionary feminist potential, an opening for re-constituting the terms on which that sexuality is made to do cultural-political work, and thereby re-constitute the terms of Caribbean women’s citizenship. I will argue here that Edgell’s novel engages the outlines of this feminist project (insofar as it does construe sex as central to the constitution of the Caribbean woman as citizen), but that it ultimately fails to fulfill, or even to fully envision, its revolutionary potential.
There isn’t a great deal of scholarship on Times, but what there is seems generally to agree that the novel is both nationalist and feminist: especially, that it pushes back against masculinist narratives of anti-colonial struggle in Belize, revealing patriarchal attitudes that stymie Belizian women’s full freedom, and foregrounding the important roles played by women in nation-building. Adele Newson calls Pavana Leslie “the mother of independence, who refuses to be victimized by man or government” (198). Julie Moody-Freeman argues that Times—like all Edgell’s novels—constitutes a re-writing “of Belizian history to challenge patriarchy and imperialism” (33). These are persuasive interpretations of the novel, which are predicated to varying degrees on reading the young Pavana’s choice to have and raise her children on her own as an assertion of personal and moral autonomy. She resists both her own initial impulse to terminate the pregnancy, and Alex’s offer of a life as his mistress and mother of his children (out of wedlock) back in Belize. In so doing—in striking out on her own, raising her children without any man’s financial support, and creating a loving and stable home for them—Pavana arguably counteracts one of the novel’s dominant tropes: family structures that are irreparably warped by the effects of male sexual adventurism.

However, it’s worth pausing to consider the prior moment, in which Pavana had been determined to terminate the pregnancy. She attributes this determination first to being “too cowardly to face this alone,” and then—tellingly—to being “Too proud, I suppose, to prove that I’m cut from the same cloth as most of the unmarried women at home” (111). The reader moves on from this moment through a novel strewn with single mothers, women who arrive at that condition through abandonment, widowhood, rape, and (what is construed as) youthful folly. Pavana’s resistance to the idea that she is “cut from the same cloth” as most of these women, whose figures she conjures up as negative role-models (except the widow, whom she sees as heroic), constitutes a problem for the novel’s feminist-nationalist project, because it radically constrains Pavana’s capacity for solidarity to a narrow range of women whose sexual behaviors and family-formation choices she construes as respectable.

The issue of single motherhood in the novel is framed via Pavana’s memory of the tragic fate of Miss Junie Silver, a working-class woman abandoned by her upper-class babyfather, who murders their infant at the babyfather’s wedding (to someone else) and dies many years later in an asylum. The incident,
which Pavana witnesses as an adolescent, seems to serve her as a cautionary tale about the kind of woman not to be. Miss Erline Grant (Pavana’s adult neighbor, with whom she was standing when she witnessed Junie Silver kill her infant) explicitly recapitulates the scene as, interestingly, a moral fable about the dangers not of premarital sex, but of emotional fragility: “Every day women in this town have babies for men who don’t marry them, but they don’t kill their babies. They keep their head. Something is wrong with Miss Junie Silver, do you understand me, Pavana?” (13). On the face of it, this might seem to offer a salutary lesson for a budding feminist heroine, suggesting as it does that one can transgress the norms of bourgeois feminine respectability (which dictate that sex and childbearing are exclusively the province of married women) and yet survive, if one “keep[s] their head.”

But the moral of this story is complicated—if not entirely subverted—by the mode of its telling. From this moment, Miss Erline’s account degenerates into a bald rehearsal of classism and the very respectability politics that her prior remarks might have been taken to repudiate. “Mr. Edward Kelly” (the babfather) is insistently described as coming from a “fine” family. “They come from a long line of people in the [civil] service. Fine people all,” says Miss Erline, and again, “Mr. Kelly is a decent, upstanding man, a fine Creole, well respected in the service and by everyone” (13). This is provided as context for the suggestion that Miss Junie Silver may have deluded herself about her baby’s paternity: “people like Miss Junie Silver, well, sometimes they get fixed on an idea. The baby may not be Mr. Edward Kelly’s at all, now that I think about it” (13). Thus, Miss Erline reveals herself as an apologist for, rather than an opponent of, the regressive code that governs female sexual behavior (and cross-class fraternization) for the benefit of high-status men, as she constructs Miss Junie Silver as not just tragically fragile, but an utterly unreliable witness to her own story.

Although she does not explicitly say so, Pavana seems to reject Miss Erline’s version of the story. When she later encounters Mr. Edward Kelly as the permanent secretary in her ministry, she sees him as “a cold, calculating man, perhaps even cruel” (135), suggesting that Junie Silver’s version of events is entirely credible to her, and that she sees Junie Silver as a victim of Edward Kelly’s cruelty. Thus, if Junie Silver—or, more precisely, her murdered baby—haunts Pavana, what the spectre seems to warn against, above all, are the dan-
gers of predatory male sexuality, a sense of menace that the rest of the novel bears out. But the ghost of Junie Silver as Miss Erline constructs her—as the unreliable (low-status) woman whose word cannot prevail against that of the respectable (high-status) man—also lingers, re-surfacing later in the figure of Lynnette Bennett.

Lynnette Bennett’s son, Stoner Bennett, is Alex’s half-brother; his antagonistic relationships with Alex and with Pavana provide a great deal of the novel’s narrative energy. When Stoner kidnaps Pavana and Alex’s children as part of a complicated political plot, Pavana’s search for the children leads to an encounter with Lynnette, who runs a small roadside shop. The older woman is initially hostile and unhelpful, a posture she later explains by her apprehension that “maybe you think you better than me” (249), alluding to the evident class differences between the two women. However, eventually they exchange their personal histories of involvement with Adams men: Pavana as the unmarried mother of Alex’s children, and Lynnette as the former maid and rape victim of Alex’s father. This causes Lynnette to warm to Pavana, telling her, “We’re the same kind, you and me. Messed up by the same bloody family” (248), and “You and me, we cut out of the same cloth” (249). This last phrase is important, for it recalls the exact language in which Pavana had earlier expressed the wish to distance herself from women like Lynnette Bennett. In the moment, Pavana accepts Lynnette’s claims of affiliation and allegiance, but—as soon becomes apparent—it is less clear that she has overcome the need to distinguish herself from unmarried mothers whose lives she finds distasteful.

The similarities between Pavana’s circumstances and Lynnette’s become more pronounced in a scene towards the end of the novel, when Alex comes very close to raping Pavana. The assault is only aborted by her direct accusation: “Are you going to rape me, Alexander Joseph Abrams, like your father raped Stoner Bennett’s mother all those years ago?” (281). Here Pavana asserts a kind of sisterhood with Lynnette Bennett, and positions Alex within the novel’s broader lineage of socially powerful, sexually predatory men. Yet the clarity and force of that assertion is immediately diluted when, in response to Alex’s expression of shock, she backs down, saying only, “I don’t know if it is true … but that is what she told me” (281). When he presses—“Did you believe her, Pavana?”—she again responds with equivocation: “At the time I did … believe her, I mean. She seemed to be telling the truth” (282). Nothing has
changed since Pavana’s conversation with Lynnette; she has received no new information, nor has the reader seen her re-considering the credence she had lent Lynnette’s story. She simply won’t assert that credence in front of Alex. This failure to defend Lynnette’s version of events blunts the force of Pavana’s righteous accusation. So strong is Pavana’s need to dis-identify with a woman in Lynnette Bennett’s situation that she is willing, like Miss Erline Grant so many years prior, to deny that woman even the right to the truth of the most traumatic event of her life.

If one speculates about the origins of Pavana’s aversion to being identified with Lynnette, class consciousness is certainly a credible contender: Pavana explicitly celebrates her own professional successes and seems to enjoy the class status and recognition that result from them. However, I want to suggest that there is more at work here, that Lynnette discomfits Pavana not merely because she is an implicit reminder of the fragility of the latter’s class status but also, and perhaps more resonantly, because her life bears the unequivocal traces of transgressive sexual activity: sex, and reproduction, outside the bonds of marriage. That Lynnette was the victim of, rather than an agent in, that activity does nothing (it would seem) to reduce the extent to which she bears its taint in Pavana’s eyes. To support this case, I turn now to an exploration of the novel’s broader treatment of sex and desire.

Pavana’s refusal of the position as Alex’s mistress and babymother is set against the novel’s insistent and extended depiction of the strength of her desire for him, a desire that persists even into the narrative present, more than a decade after their relationship has ended. The evidence for this is almost too extensive to enumerate: she is “Astonished at the strength of the old emotions aroused within her” by seeing him (81–82); she holds on for a long time to a watch he had given her, admitting (when she finally relinquishes it) that it had been “a symbol of hope for an eventual reconciliation between Alex and herself” (105); she’s given to nostalgic musing over the “rich, vibrant tones of his voice” (139) and to extended description of the beauty of his arms (140). When the sight of Alex, handsome and vigorous onstage at a rally late in novel, does not cause her heart to skip a beat (268), it is a noteworthy departure from the norm, and comes only after the trauma of her children’s kidnapping has laid bare the thinness of his concern for her and for them. Even so—after she has completely renounced any interest in him as childish naïveté, and has de-
terminated to make a future instead with her friend and former colleague Julian Carlisle—it seems uncertain that Pavana will ever move entirely past her desire for Alex. After he is killed in street violence (at that same rally), she foresees for herself an everlasting grief: “smiling a little though she really wanted to weep, as she knew she would do, though silently, for years to come, perhaps for as long as she lived” (306).

To be clear, Pavana’s yearning for Alex is never expressed in overtly erotic terms, but the intense and repeated attention to his physicality, coupled with the strength of her romantic longing, does bear the weight of the word desire. However, despite this desire, Pavana realizes that Alex is bad for her. Their relationship is depicted as one of dependence on her side and a Pygmalion-esque determination on his to mold her mind, character, appearance, and politics. The more autonomous and self-directed Pavana becomes, the less Alex seems interested in her; by the time she rejects his offer to set her up as his mistress, she knows that she is rejecting a life of this kind of domination, as much as anything else. This fact also explains her eventual choice (at the end of the novel) to pursue a relationship with Julian, an Englishman of Belizean parentage who has been her colleague and devoted, platonic friend for many years. Richard Patteson argues that Pavana’s time with Julian, working together in East Africa, “provide[s] her with a model of a man who does not regard her as a colony…. Although Pavana leaves Julian behind when she decides to return to Belize, they stay in touch, and the memory of an emotional attachment not corrupted by a desire to dominate remains with her and sustains her” (72).

Patteson’s reading of Julian’s role in Pavana’s life is a good one, as far as it goes. However, what is striking about her choice to accept Julian’s offer to set up house together—or rather, about the novel’s construction of that as the good, order-restoring and happiness-producing right choice—is that Julian elicits in Pavana no strong desire. She describes his presence most consistently as some variation of “comforting” (15). There is a brief moment in which her awareness of his body might suggest a potentially erotic attachment (she notices the hair on his legs, his swim trunks “hugging his slim hips” [20]). But this is fleeting, and over all, the best she can imagine between the two of them is that they “could have lived quite amicably together” (16). Further, she believes his feelings for her to be as devoid of passion as hers are for him, construing his offer as “just Julian manifesting his basically humanitarian instincts” (17).
Julian acknowledges that their relationship is not a “grand passion” (24)—by way of explicit contrast with her relationship with Alex—Pavana demurs, but the novel seems to bear this out.

Patteson suggests that Pavana’s eventual decision to reunite with Julian and pursue a relationship with him derives from the realization that he will complete her family, and therefore her idea of home. With this understanding, the reunion with Julian represents domestic (rather than romantic) fulfillment. This, too, is borne out by the novel: the twins describe Julian as “like our dad” (174), and Pavana experiences profound gratitude to him for playing that role for them. Towards the end of the novel, she realizes that she loves him when he calls in the middle of the crisis of her children’s kidnapping, and promises to come right away: “the greatest surprise was the discovery that she loved Julian, had understood that the moment she heard his voice. It had been like hearing the voice of a husband who has been away from home for a long time” (262).

However, Pavana’s profession of love for Julian is strikingly reserved. She has a contentious exchange with Alex shortly thereafter, in which he reminds her that she had previously described her relationship with Julian as lacking any “frisson” (284, italics in original). To his face she responds only, “People’s needs change, Alex, or hadn’t you noticed?” In her head she issues a much longer rebuttal: “At least he’s been a good friend to me, he’s responsible, and won’t leave me in the lurch when I need help, and I won’t lie awake nights wondering where he is, and he won’t do things to make me jealous, hinder my personal development, or make me feel feeble-minded” (284). But—even in this impassioned moment, even if only to herself—she doesn’t say, I love him, I’ve come to love him. She lists his virtues, but evinces no desire. Which, again, is noteworthy precisely because this novel has invested so much in strong romantic and erotic attachments—centrally, but not exclusively, Pavana’s attachment to Alex.

One might be tempted to read *Times* as (to borrow Donette Francis’s term) an *antiromance* that “rewrite[es] the heterosexual love plot through an adult-narrated *bildungsroman*” (6). Read in this light, the novel’s political salience inheres in Pavana overcoming her naïve romantic delusions, coming into her own as an autonomous woman, and learning to value a mutually respectful adult relationship (albeit still within the framework of a heterosexual domestic arrangement that promises middle-class respectability). I do not entirely reject that reading, but I would contextualize it within a broader thematic landscape.
in the novel that pathologizes sex and desire. One sees this in the figure of Stoner Bennett, who is not only the product of rape, but who also experiences powerful, homoerotic feelings of love and hate for Alex, his half-brother: feelings that drive his political antagonism to Alex, and lead to Alex’s death at the end of the novel. Stoner is a profoundly troubled and destructive character; it is difficult to construe his (semi-incestuous) desire for Alex as anything other than evidence of the dysfunction spawned by his father’s exploitation and abuse of his mother, the taint left by violent sex. In other words, Stoner’s desire for Alex, which he betrays but cannot bring himself to acknowledge, is not transgressive in any positive sense.

More compelling, in this pathologizing pattern, is the fact that the only female character who seems able to embrace her own sexual desires is Moria Adams, and those are (again) incestuous desires for Alex, her brother. This is alluded to and hinted at throughout the novel; the closest one comes to a revelation is Alex’s expostulation, in a moment of self-loathing, that “No door is closed to me, no bedroom door for sure, not even that of my …. [sister]” (280). Moria is an engaging character: glamorous, insouciant, and self-assured, universally desired by men, and the consistent object of Pavana’s envy. In contrast to her brother, she never betrays the slightest hint of discomfort with the nature of their relationship, or questions the reason for her absolute pre-eminence in Alex’s life.¹ Also, in a novel in which every instance of sexual congress outside the bonds of marriage results in unwanted pregnancy (with women always bearing the arduous consequences), Moria alone does not get pregnant. She is never made subject to the equation that the novel draws, almost uniformly, between sex and female vulnerability.

Still, while Moria might arguably serve as the repository of the novel’s stringently repressed transgressive desires (a re-imagined Junie Silver, who not only survives but transcends the otherwise implacable fate of the putatively fallen woman), she is no feminist role model. If the novel is—as critics have persuasively argued—a feminist-nationalist project seeking to center women in the story of Belize’s de-colonial self-fashioning in the late twentieth century,

¹ One conversation between Alex and Pavana reveals that Moria’s closeness to her brother—including “sometimes [taking] a nap beside [him] in the afternoons”—was the primary reason for the dissolution of Alex’s marriage (287); Pavana reflects later that Alex could never have cared deeply for her, or their children, because Moria “was perhaps his first love, his only love” (288).
Moria is that project’s dark underside. A wealthy and influential woman whose strongest (and perhaps only) impulses are hedonistic and self-serving, she is accused late in the novel of trafficking in narcotics. Pavana acknowledges that the truth of the allegations will likely never be proved or disproved because Moria’s “deep political cover and family connections … would probably protect her from public exposure” (286). Thus, the only single woman in the novel who can be said to be sexually free is also corrupt and corrupting, a destructive force in the lives of those around her and in the society at large.

In short, Edgell creates a symbolic landscape in which sex between married people is entirely invisible (the closest the novel comes to acknowledging the existence of connubial sex is the maternity dress and diaper-shopping of Pavana’s married friend Gail Figueroa [5]), and sex involving anyone else is both pathological and weirdly prominent; the novel repeatedly, even insistently, evokes the spectre of such sex and its unwholesome outcomes. Within this context, Pavana’s desire for Alex seems less a youthful (and, later, nostalgic) folly, which she might outgrow, and more a kind of malady to be cured. It bodes no good not because its object is unworthy, but simply because it is. She desires, and that—it seems—is bad. Reflecting later on her decision not to end her pregnancy, she construes it as “an act of self-protection, of survival,” and as the antidote to her feelings for Alex, which were ones of “obsession. She had begun to feel diseased” (148; my emphasis).

In light of all this, I depart from Kristen Mahlis’s assertion that “Pavana’s choice to have her children” is an act of “individual strength and acceptance of her freedom as a sexually active woman” (130). An act of strength, yes—but one whose laudability is called into question by her failure to enunciate (or, really, to experience) solidarity with other single mothers, and more broadly by the novel’s refusal of the possibility that women might exercise sexual agency as a healthy expression of freedom, rather than dysfunction, failure or folly. Pavana does not accept her “freedom as a sexually active woman,” but rather detaches from it, disclaims it, and sacrifices it in favor of a domestic arrangement that promises to spare her from ever having to struggle again with her own unruly desires. This, the novel’s ending seems to suggest, is how she overcomes her turbulent past and enters a future of personal tranquility and political efficacy, as a woman with a valuable role to play in her incipiently post-colonial nation. Thus, in the final analysis, Times fails to meet Francis’s definition of antiro-
mance as a genre that “refuse[s] any integrity of wholeness, insisting that there is no properly realized nation to come-of-age to and no idealized domestic or ‘home’ space to reclaim” (6). Rather, the novel proposes that there is—or might be—both an ideal nation and an ideal home space, but both are ineluctably predicated on the disciplining of unruly female desires, and their containment within sanitized, heteronormative domestic arrangements. This gesture refuses a fulsome citizenship to those women whose sexual lives and family structures are, due to whatever combination of willed and unwilled factors, otherwise. Finally, the novel’s status as an incomplete elaboration of a feminist-nationalist ideal is best illustrated by considering it through the filter of Mimi Sheller’s call for “understandings of citizenship [which] encompass… the full sexual, sensual, and erotic agency of an embodied freedom” (17). This, it seems to me, is what *In Times Like These* ultimately lacks: the idea of its protagonist, and all women, as free, embodied citizens with “full sexual, sensual and erotic agency.”
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MATERGRAFÍAS EN LA MUERTE FELIZ DE WILLIAMS CARLOS WILLIAMS

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Resumen

En La muerte feliz de William Carlos Williams (2015) de Marta Aponte Alsina se narra la vida del poeta norteamericano William Carlos Williams y la de su madre Raquel Helena Rosa Hoheb, pintora nacida en Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. La novela se escribe como una conversación inconclusa entre los dos personajes. Ese diálogo se intensifica con la figura de la narradora quien establece un diálogo paralelo con sus madres, haciendo de lo autobiográfico una estrategia ficcional. Este ensayo explora la madre como el lugar de escritura, como la figura retórica que posibilita la novela y la autobiografía.

Palabras clave: novela puertorriqueña, escritoras caribeñas, feminismo

Abstract

La muerte feliz de William Carlos Williams (2015) by Marta Aponte Alsina is the story of the American poet, William Carlos Williams and his mother, Raquel Helena Rosa Hoheb, a painter born in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. The novel is structured as a conversation between the two characters and the narrator, who at the same time speaks to her own mothers. In this novel the autobiographical mode is used as a fictional strategy. This essay explores the mother as the rhetorical figure that makes possible the novel and the autobiography.

Keywords: Puerto Rican novel, Caribbean women writers, feminism
¿Quién habla? ¿Quién eres?

La muerte feliz de William Carlos Williams (2015) de Marta Aponte Alsina convoca a presenciar la batalla entre dos voces: la del poeta norteamericano William Carlos Williams, reconocido por traducir el ritmo del habla y la cotidianidad en su poesía, y la de su madre Raquel Helena Rosa Hoheb, pintora nacida en Mayagüez en el siglo 19 e hija de migrantes caribeños, que estudia en Francia y que al casarse abandona su deseo artístico para instalarse en la ciudad de Rutherford, New Jersey. La yuxtaposición de historias, tiempos y espacios (Mayagüez, París, Puerto Plata, Nueva York, Rutherford) se entrelaza en una narrativa coral que incluye a la de una narradora muy capaz de escuchar el silencio de la conversación a gritos de esa pareja siamesa y de refundirla en su propia lengua madre.

¿Quién habla? ¿Quién eres? Son las preguntas de la medio unidad en un círculo espiritista. Son, además, las que le hace el personaje poeta William Carlos Williams a su madre anciana, también espiritista, cada vez que la atiende en el cuartito de su casa en Rutherford, New Jersey. Él, tan pendiente del sonido de las cosas, escribe a partir de esas conversaciones el texto sobre su madre, Yes, Mrs. Williams. Aponte Alsina, tan pendiente de la inscripción de las letras, reescribe el texto del poeta y lo reformula como una conversación inconclusa entre hijo y madre, que la incluye también como narradora del vocerío de su linaje femenino de Cayey, Puerto Rico.

¿Quién habla? ¿Quién eres? Son las mismas preguntas que se hará el lector, porque para definir quién habla en esta novela hay que tener un fino oído y superar el engaño de una narrativa absorbente. La narración es una amalgama poética de voces, una heteroglosia, que aquí, en esta novela, se convierte en la mesa espiritista de la familia de la madre del poeta. Se equivoca quien piense que el protagonista de la novela es William Carlos Williams, como sugiere su título. Se equivoca quien piense que la protagonista es Raquel Helena Hoheb, como nos dice el resumen en la contraportada del libro. Aquí la única protagonista es la palabra en su lidia con el odio —que es la forma indócil del amor, en su entrega absoluta para recuperar vacíos y traducir silencios. Si es así, la verdadera protagonista de este magnífico texto es la narradora. Justo cuando creemos tener ante nosotros al poeta pensando en su madre, su escritura, su esposa o sus pacientes, o cuando juramos presenciar a Raquel relatarle a su hijo su
pasado en Mayagüez, París, Puerto de Plata, Nueva York y Rutherford, aparece la narradora a recordarnos que esta es su fabulación.

Por una parte, la negociación de las voces se traduce en la lucha por transformar en pintura o escritura la cotidianidad, que es la historia de sus personajes. Oído y ojo son los sentidos que mueven la mano; la escritura es aquí la prótesis con la que se quiere recuperar la belleza de los ritmos oídos, de la luz y los colores vistos. Entonces en el texto se recuperan los procesos artísticos de la madre y del hijo. De Raquel: la destreza de la mano, la capacidad del ojo de ver la sombra y el cuadro espiritual del sujeto retratado, el talento prefigurado por su hermano Carlos, la promesa de su concreción en el viaje de estudio a París, la certeza de la imposibilidad de un sueño de artista para una hija de una familia venida a menos del Mayagüez de finales de siglo XIX, y el consuelo de una cotidianidad monótona en un suburbio de Nueva York como esposa de un insípido comerciante de fragancias inglés y madre de dos hijos. De William Carlos: el atento oído a los sonidos de la lengua; la recolección de palabras en innumerables notas; el querido encierro en el ático de la casa para protegerse de las obligaciones de su práctica médica, de las interrupciones de sus hijos, de su esposa Floss y de su madre Raquel; la cotidiana lucha con las palabras para experimentar con la expresión y el lenguaje mientras hundía las teclas de la máquina de escribir; y el reconocimiento de la indiferencia hacia su poesía de quien publica sabiendo que nadie espera su obra. Todo está dicho desde una escritura del oído que logra acompasar el ritmo del poeta en su densidad tropológica, las sombras de la pintora en la luminosidad de sus descripciones y el testimonio de los textos históricos en la puntillosa inclusión de una madura investigación del contradictorio entre siglos. Es ambiciosa la escritura de una lograda narración que se sabe poesía: “La perfecta densidad del poeta. Observar desprendiéndose de sí. Solo el poema abre un lente preciso sobre el mundo. El poema sirve” (Aponte Alsina, La muerte feliz de William Carlos Williams 249).

La novela, en su gesto experimental, acuna el ritmo de Williams. Habría que remitirse aquí por ejemplo a la recreación de los stepdowns en el capítulo en que se cita el catálogo de la Exhibición Mundial de París de 1878. Allí el inventario de la exhibición se hace en los tercetos en forma de escalera, a la usanza de algunos poemas de Williams. No obstante, el gesto experimental de esta novela se encuentra en el lugar que ocupa la narradora y la inserción de lo autobiográfico o la autoficción en una novela de apariencia biográfica. ¿Qué hacer con la
irrupción de la autobiografía en la novela del poeta norteamericano? ¿Será esa la forma en que la narradora ha querido novelar a los personajes históricos para apartarlos de un discurso biográfico? O acaso, ¿será la pretensión contraria: novelar lo autobiográfico cuando se narra la vida de otros?

Aunque se puede rastrear el coqueteo con el gesto autobiográfico desde el primer capítulo del texto, es en el 22, en el cual, sin demasiado anuncio, la narradora irrumpe con su relato:

Fermina Díaz López se llamaba mi abuela materna. Hace poco desperté sabiendo que le debo un recuerdo. […] Me senté al escritorio, abrí una libreta nueva y empecé a escribir a mano, incapaz de maltratar un teclado pensando en ella. Esta mano es la suya, es su carne. La urgencia de escribirla indica que su muerte no ha sido todavía. (La muerte feliz de William Carlos Williams 216)

¿Por qué de pronto la narradora/autora parece sorprendernos con la puesta en escena de un capítulo completo sobre su linaje femenino, los cuentos de su madre y su abuela Fermina? Es inocuo rastrear lo “auto” en la novela, corroborar las coincidencias extratextuales (firma, biografía) en la narración, porque el yo es siempre una ficción representada, una máscara restauradora, en las palabras de Paul de Man.¹ Lo interesante es leer ese “auto” como un gesto textual que permite lecturas disidentes a una tradición narrativa biográfica desde la que parece estructurarse La muerte feliz de William Carlos Williams.

Hay quien prefiere llamar autoficción a la situación de discurso en la que el narrador protagonista se identifica con el nombre de la firma, como lo hizo Serge Doubrosky para nombrar su novela Fils en 1977 y diferenciarla así del pacto autobiográfico que supuestamente implica la autobiografía en la teoría de Phillipe Lejeune. Lejos de la tradición crítica de Lejeune, y en deuda con los postulados de Paul de Man y Jacques Derrida, pienso que las huellas del sujeto de escritura siempre quedan dispersas en las páginas de cualquier ficción, por lo tanto, prefiero el término autobiografía tan apegado a la escritura, como lo evidencia el morfema graf del sustantivo.² No veré la reconstrucción del “yo”

¹ En “Autobiography as De-Facement”, de Man define la autobiografía como un escenario en donde se oscila entre el dar y quitar un rostro o una máscara al Yo ausente del discurso.
² Remito al primer capítulo de De(s)madres o el rastro materno en las escrituras del Yo. A propósito de Jacques Derrida, Jamaica Kincaid, Esmeralda Santiago y Carmen Boullosa, donde
de Aponte Alsina en la viñeta de Cayey del capítulo 22, leeré la forma en que ese capítulo dispara hacia una lectura matergráfica: una lectura que supone la escritura (de gesto autobiográfico) en relación con la figura interdicta de la madre; ya sea Raquel, Fermina o cualquier nombre que ocupe tal tropo. En dichos textos la mater es figura que funciona como el otro para quién, por qué y desde quién se estructura el relato.³

La novela narra el proceso poético de Williams como una suma de esfuerzos, cuerpos y voces. La concentración de la escritura supone el cuarto y el asistente propios. En el texto hay una insistencia, casi incómoda, en la ecuación que da el total. Por eso el reconocimiento de esos cuerpos que dan la suma de una poesía trascendental en la tradición norteamericana del siglo XX. Porque para escribir la biografía del poeta William Carlos Williams hay que describir la vida en relación a quienes la posibilitaron:

los pacientes, la moderna esposa Floss –ordenadora del mundo donde el poeta persistente escribe– y la severa, frívola y contenciosa madre. Raquel ocupa buena parte de su escritura. Señala la narradora que William quiere escribirla, no porque la quiera sino “para poder quererla”. (13)

Como si todo aconteciera con la entrega de la madre, el texto comienza con la escena de escritura del poeta irascible el día en que Mr. Taylor se lleva a Raquel al hospicio y termina con la muerte feliz de la madre y la increpación del hijo: “¿Por qué madre? ¿Por qué te ves tan feliz? ¿Por qué me impones la alegría que no entiendo? ¿Por qué?” (260-1)

Que la madre muera feliz, molesta al poeta. ¿Será porque escribe por ella, a través de ella, en ella? ¿Será que su cuerpo, con su boca, su voz y sus gritos, es el espacio sobre el que escribe? ¿Será que con la muerte de la madre se acaba

³ En el libro antes referido De(s)madres o el rastro materno en las escrituras del Yo. A propósito de Jacques Derrida, Jamaica Kincaid, Esmeralda Santiago y Carmen Boullosa, examino la relación que se establece entre la figura madre y ciertos textos llamados autobiográficos. Acuño el término matergrafía para nombrar los textos autobiográficos en donde la figura de la madre ocupa el lugar del Otro (del oído) sobre el que se estructura y se escribe el relato.
la escritura? Por lo menos en esta novela sí, la madre es la escritura y su límite. En *La muerte de William Carlos Williams* la madre se convierte en el lugar de escritura, en la figura retórica que posibilita al escritor. Pero la madre se ve como metáfora de la locura, del grito, del ático, del amor indócil, de lo mestizo y confuso, aquello sobre lo que se construye el cuerpo de palabras que es toda poesía. La figura materna es perversa, abyecta porque no reconoce límites. La novela parecería confundirnos entre su voz y la del poeta. El cuarto de la madre y sus gritos infesta la vida del hijo y su escritura. ¿Quién habla? ¿Quién eres? es el continuo grito del hijo.

Esa madre severa, frívola y bestial provoca que el poeta escriba para domesticarla y amarla, pues “la literatura es también cementerio e ira apalabrada; confusa expresión de cariño” (22). Entre la voz de la madre y el oído del hijo se cifra la posibilidad de la escritura. “Su mano vive entrando y saliendo de la cabeza de la madre” aclara la narradora (237). “Raquel es la guía y el hijo su copista discolo” (167). La novela se escribe como conversación inconclusa entre la entrega de la madre y su muerte feliz. El círculo se cierra con la desaparición del lugar de entrada al mundo de William Carlos. ¿Qué digo?, el círculo nunca se cierra, porque cada punto del círculo es, a la vez, “el centro de otro círculo, y así al infinito” (54).

Entre esas dos voces y la conversación entre ellas, surge otra, la de la narradora, llamémosla Marta Aponte Alsina y sus madres. Digo llamémosla porque nunca aparece el nombre Marta Aponte Alsina. Sí, hay un linaje Díaz. Sí, hay una tradición boscosa. Sí, una casa de Cayey y otra de Bayamón. Sí, una madre, una hermana y una abuela. Este texto no solo habla de la dura madre de Williams, sino también de las madres de la narradora y con ellas se establece una relación entre la escritura y la figura materna. Si bien estoy convencida de que toda escritura devela un sesgo autobiográfico, nunca antes había leído un texto de Aponte Alsina donde se jugara tan afanadamente con la apariencia de dicho discurso. Como si hablar de la madre de Williams llevara a escribir sobre la propia. “Escribir a la madre es traición amorosa” (176), señala la narradora, y en esta su novela más reciente, Aponte Alsina se acusa de traición, al retomar el recuerdo de una madre niña que destruyó sus memorias y que ahora nos devuelve la narradora-autora en su novela. Me parece que la poesía, como espacio del exceso y del tráfico de voces, entra en el texto contundentemente en el momento en que esa figura del discurso-autora, personaje, narradora parece asu-
mir la postura autobiográfica al relatar el cuento de su abuela materna Fermina Díaz López y el de su madre. Con él exhibe la cantera de su escritura en dicha filiación. Además, ese capítulo de la abuela Fermina desarticula la posibilidad biográfica de una novela sobre un personaje histórico. La biografista no desaparece, se construye en figura del relato, con tanta carne como los personajes históricos que quiere novelar.

El capítulo nos remite a la historia que subyace en otra novela de Aponte Alsina, *El fantasma de las cosas* (2010). Allí una vieja escritora cayeyana, bruja y ropavejera intenta relatar la historia de su padre. Hay un fantasma que sugiere el cuento del padre, la historia oculta de la madre de Silvinia, que “hablaba con los pájaros cuando andaba descalza por el bosque cargando un muerto en una bolsa de papel.... Pero el cuento de la madre no cabe aquí” (18), nos señala abruptamente la narradora de esa novela. En ese texto la alusión al relato materno perturba porque propone a la madre como un sujeto fuera del lenguaje, por ello la madre y su historia parecerían ser inapalabrables en la sintaxis de la novela. Incluso, más adelante en *El fantasma de las cosas*, la madre reaparece, esta vez como un personaje que le increpa a la hija su presencia: “¿Por qué?, grita la madre. ¿Por qué no me dejaste entrar a este cuento? Porque no, dice Silvinia” (70). Ya desde el título del capítulo “Basta ya de poesía” se sugiere que la historia materna excede la sintaxis de *El fantasma de las cosas*. El relato materno exigiría otra lógica, otra gramática, quizás la de la poesía.

Ese relato materno con apariencia autobiográfica irrumpe en *La muerte feliz de William Carlos Williams*. Acá en el capítulo 22, como antes he referido, se narra la historia de la abuela, y aparece el relato de la madre niña del *Fantasma de las cosas* cuando la narradora nos cuenta una anécdota de su madre:

Mi madre me regaló otra anécdota implacable. Érase una niña descalza, érase que su madre moribunda no toleraba alimentos fuertes, a la niña la envían a la casa de una hermana en busca de una paloma para hacer un caldo. Érase que la niña vuelve corriendo con la paloma metida en una bolsa de estraza a la que le abren unos huecos para que el pájaro respire. La reciben llantos, quejas, gritos. La madre ha muerto... (228)

La niña que busca la paloma para la madre moribunda forma parte del relato de apariencia autobiográfica inserto en *La noche feliz*. Contarlo aquí es dejar hablar a la madre, elaborar esa “mitología de las mujeres”, ese
folklore de lo monstruoso que tiene que ver con el parto, como señala la misma narradora.

La tradición boscosa quiero llamar a un sesgo de la escritura apontina que se organiza a partir de un mapa de voces y cuerpos indóctiles, límites e interdictos: la bruja, la remendona, la vieja, la maga, la roba chicos, la lunática, la costurera, la narradora, en fin, cuerpos que remiten al materno. No olvidemos que es el bosque y no la ciudad el territorio de la bruja —y en esta filiación de textos, el espacio de la bruja madre o la madre bruja. Quisiera proponer la abyección de lo materno como un efecto estético desestabilizador y disidente en la escritura de Aponte Alsina. Es uno de sus lugares de escritura/lectura más fascinantes. La madre abyecta por bruja, deslenguada, espiritista, mestiza, provoca angustia, terror. Logra un fin estético perturbador. La madre se acomoda en el interior del cuerpo de la narradora, así como lo hizo en el interior de la voz del poeta. El efecto estético de lo siniestro en el relato permite una mirada incómoda hacia un lugar que parece común: la maternidad. La madre es metonimia del exceso en el texto. La madre es origen y límite de la escritura de Williams y de su narradora. El malestar de lo maternal autobiográfico, provocado como efecto de lectura en la novela de Aponte Alsina, podría dar paso a una poética disidente sobre la escritura de la maternidad y de toda una tradición narrativa nacional.

Desde su primer texto Angélica furiosa (1994) puede leerse en la narrativa de Marta Aponte Alsina la insistencia en ese lugar difícil de nombrar, aquella figura que se coloca en el universo de las interdicciones del lenguaje y que ha venido a significar una de las figuras retóricas de la disidencia, de las fugas del lenguaje que desafían la representación simbólica. Colocadas en el reverso del lenguaje oficial, esas voces a veces siniestras pueblan su narrativa. Pensemos en la traductora —traidora que remienda los zapatos de sus hombres poetas en el

4 Como señala M. Foucault, todas estas figuras se hayan en las interdicciones del lenguaje. Pronuncian palabras desacralizadas, perdidas, sin aparente sentido o con significados prohibidos. La lengua bruja cuestiona el lugar del habla tradicional. El bosque es el espacio de la bruja. Ver, M. Foucault, Los anormales, 17–205. Refiero además a la importancia que adquiere la bruja como espacio de desafío y desarticulación del orden simbólico patriarcal en el pensamiento de Julia Kristeva, Hélene Cixous, Catherine Clément y Luce Irigaray. Ver, Julia Kristeva y Catherine Clément Lo femenino y lo sagrado, Hélène Cixous, La risa de la medusa y Luce Irigaray, The Speculum of The Other Woman. Utilizo lo abyecto según lo propone Julia Kristeva para hablar de aquello que se opone al Yo y por lo tanto “perturba una identidad, un sistema, un orden. Aquello que no respeta los límites, los lugares, las reglas” (11). Para Kristeva lo abyecto se relaciona directamente con lo maternal.
cuento “Versos pedestres” junto a su cómplice ropavejera Lupe, o la bruja, loca insolente del relato “Casa negra”, que desborda su carcajada feroz en la cámara de Susan (La casa de la loca, 2001). También se observa en Violeta Cruz, la narradora costurera, bolerista y forense de Sexto sueño (2007) que nos cuenta la historia de Nathan Leopold en la mesa de disección, o, como ya vimos, la narradora Silvinia del El fantasma de las cosas, que se niega a contar la historia de su madre. También es Raquel Hoheb, la madre deslenguada, rabiosa, que como mesa espiritista trafica con tantos otros. Igual es William Carlos, ese poeta afeminado del ático que da paso a tantas voces. Como si con esos personajes femeninos se refundiera una tradición que hace del remiendo, texto; del desperdicio, discurso; de la voz, heteroglosia; del bosque y la abyección materna, mapa para una relectura de la tradición literaria puertorriqueña.

5 En “Una bruja que habla sola: la narrativa de Marta Aponte Alsina”, Revista La Torre, Año XIV, 52-54 (2009): 549-565, Malena Rodríguez Castro, a propósito de la novela Sexto sueño, lee el gesto de resistencia de Aponte Alsina dentro de la tradición narrativa puertorriqueña. Señala que su obra se distingue por la “obstinada originalidad de un estilo que pone en crisis superficies reconocibles de la escritura” (549).
OBRAS CITADAS


SARGASSO (2016-17, I & II)
TALK ABOUT A LITTLE ECOCRITICAL CULTURE: GUADELOUPE AS A TOXIC ISLAND?

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Abstract
Ringo, the first-person narrator of Ernest Pépin’s 2010 novel, Toxic Island, describes his “past” as self-obsessed with consumerism and marred by a neglected environment. Gina, an eighteenth-century soucougnan, becomes the transformative agent who revisits the island’s rich culture while listing the ills of its environmental and cultural degradation. Timothy Williams’s 2015 novel, The Honest Folk of Guadeloupe, deals with the murders of an environmental activist and a French tourist. Written in English, it is presented through the investigative magistrate, Anne Marie Laveaud, a French-Algerian divorced from a prominent Guadeloupean. The novels depict the acceleration of environmental and cultural toxic degradation of the island because of its political status vis-à-vis France.

Keywords: Caribbean novel, landscape, ecocriticism, Guadeloupe

Resumen
Ringo, narrador en primera persona de la novela de Ernest Pépin, Toxic Island (2010), describe su “pasado” ser obsesionado por el consumismo y arruinado por el descuidado medioambiente. Gina, soucougnan del siglo dieciocho, se convierte en agente que transforma y reexamina la rica cultura isleña al enumerar los males causados por las degradaciones ambientales y culturales. La novela de Timothy Williams, The Honest Folk of Guadeloupe (2015), encara los asesinatos de un activista ambientalista y de una turista francesa. La novela se presenta a través de la magistrada, Anne Marie Laveaud, una franco-argelina divorciada de un importante guadalupeño. Las novelas describen la aceleración de la tóxica degradación del medioambiente y de la cultura isleña dado su estatus político ante Francia.

Palabras clave: novela caribeña, paisaje, ecocritica, Guadeloupe
Greg Garrard posits that “environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms, because they are the outcome of an interaction between ecological knowledge of nature and its cultural inflection” (16). This approach proves invaluable when delving into ecological issues in Caribbean texts because they tap into the islanders’ rich knowledge of nature and their first-hand awareness of the effects of the tourism industry. These include not just the construction of hotels but also the commodification of Creole culture for foreign consumption. Some Caribbean authors also address environmental problems brought on by widespread corruption of those in power. Literary texts suggest that there is a correlation between decisions related to environmental issues and the role cultural traditions play in the decision-making process. These may be due to the economic pressures faced by the young lured by the mirage of easy money. Some works sound an alarm signaling cultural inflections that go unquestioned and are represented through characters with an oblivious attitude towards the environment that becomes toxic.\(^1\) Toxicity is detrimental because it affects future generations, especially if Caribbean people neglect to understand how their particular island culture is part of a greater pan-Caribbean and globalized whole. When individuals are not curious about their cultural legacy, they usually do not care about the repercussions of a neglected environment either. How one deals with environmental issues is encoded in one’s culture. To disregard the vast knowledge of the natural (human and non-human) world accumulated by the ancestors is counterproductive. To prepare for the future and make informed decisions about the environment, one must comprehend one’s cultural past. To be willing to know about the past allows for reasoned adoptions and adaptations of elements which may or may not be toxic. Sylvia Wynter advises that “we must learn to sit down together and talk about a little culture.” Therefore, it behooves Caribbeanists to sit down together and talk about a little ecocritical culture as well.

Robin Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, examines Jamaica Kincaid’s writing as an example of “postcolonial pastoral, [a] writing that refracts an idealized nature through memories of environmental and cultural degradation in the colonies” (245). Kincaid’s 1988 essay, *A Small Place*, is not the sole example. Texts written about Guadeloupe afford us the

\(^{1}\) I use “toxic” as per its first definition in the *Oxford Online Dictionary*: poisonous; relating to or caused by poison; very bad, unpleasant, or harmful.
opportunity to explore parallel ecological concerns given a shared colonial past of slavery, plantation societies, and indentured workers. Throughout the colonial period, France introduced exogenous elements (plants, animals, and people) into Guadeloupe. After the 1946 *loi de départementalisation*, Guadeloupe, no longer a colony, became an overseas department of France. French language and culture became official and required in schools and non-Creole-speaking public servants from the Hexagon and other former French colonies migrated to the island to work. By 1946, the descendants of White colonists, African slaves, *békés*², and East Indian indentured workers, as well as their languages, cuisines, religious rituals, music, and knowledge of nature co-existed, and a seemingly endogenous Creole culture had emerged amid the racial and class tensions. However, as Western and, specifically, French schooling became the “official” educational discourse, it *de facto* attempted to erode or minimize, among others, indigenous and African cultural contributions including notions of how humans relate to the natural world. These non-Western notions, although significant, became marginalized elements relegated to the scientifically less prestigious realm of Guadeloupe’s oral tradition and popular culture. The authors note how the youth do not necessarily want to learn to understand what they consider passé cultural elements.

Novels such as Ernest Pépin’s (b. 1950) *Toxic island*³ (2010) and Timothy Williams’s (b. 1946) *The Honest Folk of Guadeloupe* (2015) present Guadeloupe’s pressing environmental problems (i.e., rampant consumerism, and uncontrolled touristic development) which in turn are inextricably linked to the degradation of culture (i.e., legends, food, and music) in favor of economic ease. By the onset of the twenty-first century, the heirs of departmentalization find themselves in a Guadeloupe with the second highest unemployment rate of the European Union, low wages, and rising prices (almost everything is imported).⁴ Indeed, according to an online *BBC News* article, by 2009, because the *békés* control of the majority of the wealth on the island, these economic

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² Creole term used to describe a descendant of the early European, usually French, settlers in the French Antilles.
³ In French, in a book title only the first word is capitalized (even though the title is in English).
⁴ Perhaps more alarming is the fact that the “unemployment rates for young people—in the 15–24 age range—were … highest in Guadeloupe (55.7%)” (“French Isles Top EU Jobless Rate”).
conditions led to a general strike which erupted into riots, thus exposing the deep-seated racial tensions, the way in which different classes relate to environmental concerns, and cracks in the seemingly cohesive endogenous Creole culture. The hospitality industry was severely affected and the formal economy tanked (“French Isles . . .”). What are Guadeloupeans to do? Officially, they are French citizens with equal rights and privileges. But they are also descendants of slaves, slave owners, and indentured servants. They speak French and French Creole. Yet economically, they depend on subsidies from France and tourists who seek what they envision to be a Caribbean paradise, albeit a very expensive one, for their holidays. Through different optics, the two novels examine how this dependency has become toxic and eats at what had become the signifiers of an endogenous culture of resistance (e.g., knowledge of nature acquired from African ancestors and the existence of a Creole language). The gradual toxic process almost goes unnoticed because, according to the authors, Guadeloupeans at the end of the twentieth century show little interest in their culture as individual desires for the facile acquisition of status symbols take precedence over the collective well-being. These self-centered selves in a fast-paced consumerist society have little time for examining culture or paying close attention to the environment. In the two novels, the results of absorption and/or acceptance of toxic elements such as drug use and the tourism industry are vividly portrayed. But the authors also question if accepted cultural elements could also be toxic if they affect Guadeloupe’s views on human and non-human nature.

Pépin, a Guadeloupean writer, critic, and political figure, bemoans the current state of affairs in his island. Toxic island, published in Guadeloupe, is written in French and interspersed with Creole (even though the title is in English). The text is presented through the eyes of a young adult first-person narrator and male protagonist, Ringo, who realizes that among his peers there is the loss of a sense of history, traditions, and legends; an erosion of the Creole language; and no interest in iconic trees, traditional music, or foods. The world of yore (antan) has given way to consumerism, drug use, rampant commercialization, and uncontrolled growth and expansion of the tourism industry. That is until one evening, when he meets a mysterious woman, Gina, who becomes the agent who effects change and through whom Ringo revisits the island’s rich culture.

Timothy Williams, an English and French author, has dual citizenship and currently teaches at a Lycée in Guadeloupe. The Honest Folk of Guadeloupe
is written in English and set from May 16 to 22 May 1990—just months after Hurricane Hugo. Williams’s alter ego, *judge d’instruction* (investigative magistrate) Anne Marie Laveaud, a French-Algerian, has been assigned to investigate the suspicious suicide of a high-profile environmental activist and media personality, Monsieur Rudolphe Dugain, who, as the Director of the Environment Centre, is surrounded by opposition. But Anne Marie is quickly “pulled” off from this case, and instead, she is assigned to investigate the murder of a French tourist, Evelyn Vaton. As the *procureur* (attorney general) explains to Anne Marie: “The murder of a tourist is of paramount importance. . . . Tourism is the only industry that brings in any money on this island” (23–24). Williams’s novel, written in English, depicts Guadeloupe through the prism of a third-person omniscient narrator and relays Anne Marie’s thoughts as a person who lives on the island and is very knowledgeable, but is not Guadeloupean. The author is an outsider, a white French subject trying to describe the politics, the culture, and the effects of tourism in this, then, Overseas Department (*DOM*). The title comes from a French Antilles saying alluded to in the novel: “The noblemen of Saint-Domingue, the gentlemen of Martinique and the honest folk of Guadeloupe” (in italics in the text, 10). This eighteenth-century saying indicates how those in power still perceive that the political, economic, and cultural position of Guadeloupe remains second to that of Martinique.

In Pépin’s novel, Ringo’s friends are all marginal or semi-marginal figures (prostitutes, drug addicts, and dealers). As they interact with Gina, they slowly become aware of their lassitude. She makes them realize that they have become uninterested in knowing what is going on culturally or politically on the island. With no concern for the past or the future, they indulge in hedonistic pursuits (drugs, alcohol, fast cars, fashionable clothes, bling, and sex). Ringo proudly proclaims that “la vie roulait sa gangrène et nous, nous nous démenions dans ce panier à crabs avec insouciance et fierté. Qui pouvait nous arrêter? . . . Il n’y avait pour nous ni enfer, ni paradis. Seulement l’instant que nous devions brûler comme une roche de crack” (“life spread its gangrene, and we, we were scrambling in this basket of crabs [Guadeloupe] with carelessness and pride. Who could stop us? . . . For us there was no hell or paradise. Only the *instant* that we had

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5 Columbus discovered Guadeloupe during his second voyage in November 1493. Martinique and Guadeloupe became Overseas Departments (*DOM*) in 1946. Since 2003, they are called Overseas Regions (*DROM*=Départements et régions d’outre-mer).
to burn like crack rock”) (emphasis mine 13–14). Soon after Gina enters into Ringo’s life, and struck by her enigmatic ways, he and some female friends go to the “oldest” person they know, Man Sonson, in search of knowledge. They remember that an elder may possess that traditional lore needed to unravel the mystery. In effect, the old lady listens to Ringo’s story and informs him that this woman who does not like salt and has no smell may come from the world of the spirits or that she is a mirage, a fantasy, a sleight of hand from the world of beyond. Upon listening to Man Sonson, the female friends who had accompanied Ringo start to question the degree of toxicity of their self-indulgent way of life. Their lives have become “grains épars” (“scattered kernels,” 37) because they had ignored their cultural past and no longer seem to recognize the traits of an intrinsic Guadeloupean figure of their folklore.

Gina’s message is that through a collective effort these disenfranchised young people of Guadeloupe should connect to the representatives and the culture of the pan-African diaspora—which include Guadeloupeans such as Louis Delgrès and la mûlatresse Solitude; Toussaint Louverture from Haiti; Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire from Martinique; Bob Marley from Jamaica; Martin Luther King, Michael Jackson, and Barack Obama from the US. Yet, there is another significant entity, the “island” itself to which the young people must first try to reconnect and understand how they have allowed it to become a toxic space. This landscape bears the marks of the abuses committed on its soil: sugar cane plantations, importation of non-native species, annihilation of indigenous populations, forced importation and exploitation of slaves and indentured workers, disappearance of forested areas, and “bétonnisation—cementification.” Because of these violent changes and the economic dependency on France, the population—especially the young—have become numb or disinterested in cultivating or learning about Guadeloupe’s natural, historical, and cultural richness. Their cultural past had become an endangered species.

Ringo opens the novel with: “Je me sentais léger en ce temps désolés où la modernité massacrait l’île” (“I felt light during those desolate times during which modernity massacred the island,” 9). The son of a prostitute and a drug dealer,

6 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
7 Louis Delgrès was a mulatto military leader who resisted Napoleon’s restitution of slavery. La mûlatresse Solitude is a historical figure of mythical proportions because she fought next to Delgrès for freedom and was hanged after being captured.
he sums up his “light” uncaring self in a Guadeloupe obsessed with consumerism and marred by a neglected environment. As the novel progresses and he becomes cognizant of what is happening, he fears what he sees as a dire future. Undoubtedly, Ringo’s realization is due to Gina, a *soucougan*\(^8\) that at first he and his friends had not been able to identify as such. This is a folklore character who usually appears as a reclusive old woman by day; by night, she strips off her wrinkled skin and puts it in a mortar (used to crush or grind ingredients either in a kitchen or a pharmacy) for safekeeping; and in her true form as a fireball, she flies across the dark sky in search of a victim whose blood she will suck. In Pépin’s updated version, Gina is neither reclusive nor old. She is a sexy, mysterious woman who intrigues Ringo, and he eventually falls in love with her. She asks to be dropped off at the cemetery; no one sees her during the day; salt horrifies her; and is an ardent lover in bed. After a series of violent events and suspicious arson attacks, Gina is found burned and her identification papers puzzlingly reveal that she was born in 1794, the year the French Convention abolished slavery. On her hospital bed, she tells Ringo her story: Her father, a *bébé*, was attracted to his former slave, her mother, who gave herself freely to him, “*sans retenue à l’ombre d’un fromager*” (“uninhibitedly under the shade of a silk cotton tree”) —the sacred tree of the spirits (84). Angered by the African woman’s transgression, a *soucougan* enters into the blood of the just conceived Gina while the father dies of a heart attack as he sees a ball of fire (the legendary form of the *soucougan*).

Before these confessions, Ringo has noted that Gina has the image of a *fromager* tattooed on her shoulder, and he exclaims: “*Un fromager dont les branches se terminaient par des gouttes de lumière! Curieux choix! Le fromager était par excellence l’arbre aux Esprits!*” (“A silk cotton tree whose branches ended in drops of light! Curious choice! The silk cotton tree is the quintessential tree of the Spirits!” 51.) Even for Ringo, an uninterested-in-Guadeloupean-legends person, he knows about the *fromager*’s symbolic and legendary value. He goes to the countryside looking for one, and he finds it. He feels the force of the tree and upon looking up, sees Gina’s face. More importantly, he starts to listen to

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\(^8\) Pépin uses the Créole variant *soucougan* which can also be referred to as *soucouyant*. The work of Giselle Liza Anatole, *The Things That Fly at Night: Female Vampirism in Literature of the Circum-Caribbean and African Diaspora*, offers an in-depth discussion of the multiple variants of this figure of Caribbean folklore.
what she clearly articulates about the level of toxicity of the island both at the ecological and cultural levels:

*que le monde d’aujourd’hui ne valait rien et que nous allions mourir écrasés par des tonnes d’ordures, que les rivières allaient elles aussi mourir asphyxiées par toutes nos saletés, que la verdure se plaignit et que tout ça, panneaux publicitaires, supermarchés, agences immobilières (que nous appelions modernité!) n’était que les masques de l’apocalypse et qu’elle était revenue pour nous purifier en nous ramenant, vulgaire troupeau, sur le chemin de nous-mêmes.*

that today’s world was not worth anything and that we would be crushed by tons of garbage, that rivers would also die asphyxiated because of all of our filth, that green spaces complained, and that all of that, billboards, supermarkets, real estate offices (all of which we considered to be signs of “modernity”) were nothing but the masks of the apocalypse and that she had come to purify us by leading us, run-of-the-mill cattle, unto our roads of self-discovery. (59)

Upon hearing this and other stories, since Gina recounts important moments of Guadeloupean history, Ringo and his friends realize how much they and the rest of Guadeloupe’s youth have become disenfranchised from their island’s past because they are obsessed with having the latest jeans and eating at McDonald’s. Moreover, they have shown no regard for the environment. Ethnographer Christina Kulberg explains that “searching for self implies finding a common horizon for both *I* and *we*” (13). With a figure like Gina who bridges the past and the present, individual desires give way to the search for a common good for the collective “we.” All the marginal characters, who had been seeking to satisfy his/her immediate and individual needs (alcohol, drugs, sex, fancy cars, latest fashions, gold jewelry, chic villas) find collective ways in which to promote a renewed consciousness in Guadeloupean society. They desire to break away from twenty-first-century plantations: the tourism industry and drug trafficking. Their exclusively pleasure-seeking lifestyle has led them to embrace, without questioning, a “French” one. Non-Guadeloupean tourists coming to the island want to feel at “home,” and politicians, who profit from this desire, want to ensure that they do. Policy makers encourage the construction of hotels without proper consideration of the ecological impact. Tourism
also brings a plethora of imported goods that become a toxic addiction for Guadeloupeans. Ringo sums it up:

Une bande des commerçants, venus d’ailleurs se réjouissaient de nos envies, de nos désirs... Bon vin, champagne, saumon, foie gras, raisin, créaient l’illusion d’un bien-vivre... Les supermarchés ne désemplissaient pas surtout à l’approche de Noël, du jour de l’An, de Pâques, des grandes vacances, de la Fête des Mères, de la fête des grands-mères, de la fête des sécrétaires, de la fête des Pères (un peu moins), du tour de la Guadeloupe, du carnaval, de tout ce qui maquillait le jours et les nuits en fête...

A bunch of merchants, who came from other parts rejoiced in our cravings, our desires... Good wine, champagne, salmon, *pâte* *de* *foie* *gras*, grapes, created the illusion of good living... Supermarkets were never emptied out especially during the days leading up to Christmas, New Year’s, Easter, major vacations, Mothers’ Day, Grandmothers’ Day, Secretary’s Day, Father’s Day (to a lesser extent), the bike tour of Guadeloupe, Carnival, all that would disguise days and nights as holidays. (97)

Unearthing and recovering Creole culture becomes the vehicle through which the youth will counter the unquestioned toxic dependency on non-Guadeloupean goods and consumeristic ways. In *Toxic island*, after a long tirade listing the many events that have poisoned his island, Ringo notes that “Alors on se raccrochait à la langue créole, au lewoz, au tambour gwoka, au bokit, à tout ce qui restait de la grande debacle. On survivait. On se débrouillait. On s’aveuglait ...” (“Thus, one clung to the Creole language, to the lewoz (traditional dance form) to the gwoka (drum), to the bokit (a typical Guadeloupean deep-fried bread) to anything that remained after the great debacle. One survived. One made do. One was blind ...”, 100). As the novel progresses, each “marginal” character figures out a creative or collective way to amend a way of life that has become toxic. They opt to learn about their past and figure out how to transform that knowledge into ways of enhancing life for others in Guadeloupe. However, a reified/classic view of the past no longer suffices in the twenty-first century. Toward the end of this novel, there is an important *slam* scene and through this cultural expression a newfound consciousness of the pending ecological disaster is
transmitted. Sonia, one of Ringo’s friends, described at the beginning as a “fille de bonne famille...[qui] aimait, avouait-elle, le côté rebelle” (“daughter of a well-to-do family who enjoyed, she confessed, having a rebellious side,” 12) prefers to hang out with “marginal” people. Her performance embraces the interaction between her ecological concerns and the cultural medium through which she presents them. In so doing, she acknowledges the toxic effects of not worrying about the past by modifying cultural inflections for the benefit of future generations. Her slam poem first of all makes note of the fact that “Je m’appelle Gwada!” (“My name is Gwada!” --the affectionate name for Guadeloupe-- 172) and once this symbiotic relationship between her and the island is established, she poetically and creatively lists the social and environmental problems associated with tourism and consumerism:

\[
\text{...mon île à touristes} \\
\text{Les chômeurs entassés devant les comptoirs tristes.} \\
\text{Ma terre est polluée et mon âme en a marre} \\
\text{La seule chose qui pousse c’est la fleur de béton}
\]

\[
\text{... my island for tourists} \\
\text{Unemployed people piled in front of sad counters} \\
\text{My land is polluted and my soul is fed up} \\
\text{The only thing that grows is the cement flower. (173)}
\]

Gina had been asked by the “confrérie des soucoungans” (“confraternity of soucoungans,” 88) to embrace an active role in denouncing the environmental disasters of the island in order to guide its younger generation in recuperating its culture. To counter lethal toxic effects, they have to understand the urgency of gaining

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9 Poetry slams feature a broad range of voices, styles, cultural traditions, and approaches to writing and performance. One of their goals is to challenge the authority of anyone who claims absolute authority over literary value.
a national and Pan African consciousness and become engaged in safeguarding in innovative ways the knowledge of the past in order to safe keep natural resources.

In *Toxic Island*, Pépin brings forth a traditional folklore figure with modern twists, who encourages her followers to embrace new ways of acknowledging island culture. In the twenty-first century, for example, that would be a *slam* poetry session that communicates deep-seated malaises to future generations in a language and through a medium they understand. Thanks to Sonia, “*Les jeunes les plus endurcis recevaient un message qui vrillait leurs oreilles... Elle parlait d’eux avec eux. Ils secouaient la tête devant tant de vérités.*” (“The most hardened youth received a message that pierced their ears... She spoke of them to them. They shook their heads when faced with so many truths.” 172).

Guadeloupe went from a pastoral construct in the journals of Columbus to a place characterized by “concerns about its generation of hypersexuality, disease, and moral decay” (DeLoughrey et al. 7). *Toxic Island* should be considered as a post-pastoral novel because according to Terry Gifford, “fundamental to post-pastoral literature is an awe in attention to the natural world” (152) and “the recognition of a creative-destructive universe equally in balance in continuous momentum of birth and death, death and birth, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution” (153). Pépin is cognizant of this balance as he chooses Gina to be a modern *soucoungan* who belongs to a rich, past oral tradition. Because of her ancient knowledge of the natural world, the young are in awe and realize they must partake in deciding the future direction of Guadeloupe. Environmental and cultural issues are to be incorporated into a larger dialogue with the pan-African diaspora. This includes knowledge on how to care for nature and be cognizant of the toxic effects of unbridled constructions and rampant consumerism. The now illuminated young people of Guadeloupe should pull together to counter the toxicity of quick acceptance, without questioning, of exogenous elements that unceremoniously displace and, at times, eliminate the existing ones (such as the existence of *soucoungans*) that have taken centuries of transculturation to become part of the endogenous culture.\(^\text{10}\) Gina has

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\(^\text{10}\) Transculturation, a term coined by Fernando Ortiz in his *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (*Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*), describes a process where a new reality emerges. It is an active transition to a new culture because migrants change the receptive culture.
encouraged them to embrace Creole culture while revisiting it and adopting it to the twenty-first century. To that end, they would be able to develop a more informed awareness as they convey to the next generation their concerns for the future of the island, its people, its culture, and its environment.

Ringo closes his text by quoting Lukuber, another one of his friends who has found his way thanks to Gina. According to Ringo, the young are learning these words by Lukuber who is addressing them and the readers:

Messieurs et Dames,
Tout devient quelque chose par rapport à une chose qui avait déjà existé. Si donc, nous changeons le présent, nous changeons l’avenir. Oui, nous sommes la tribu des égarés mais le chemin n’est pas perdu pour autant. Les chemins plongent sous les sables, se couvrent d’herbes folles, se camouflent dans de tracés obscurs, mais ils ne se perdent jamais. C’est nous qui perdons les chemins. Eux ne nous oublient pas. Regardez-nous maintenant, petite grains, nous semons, nous semons, nous semons. Et c’est parce que nous semons que la jeunesse récoltera demain. Alors Toxic Island peut-être, mais moi Lukuber, j’apporte mon pays dans la case à rêves de Monsieur Ringo car c’est Monsieur Ringo que je l’appelle désormais. Honneur et Respect à tous les Guadeloupéens, à tous les Caribéens, à tous les bons Soucoungans. Mémoire de nos mémoires.

Messieurs et Dames! Il était une fois! Krik! Krak!

Ladies and gentlemen,
Everything becomes something from something that already existed. If we thus, change the present, we will change the future. Yes, we are the tribe of those gone astray, but the path so far is not lost. Paths plunge under the sands, become covered with wild grass, are camouflaged with obscure tracks, but they are never lost. It is we who lose the paths. They don’t forget us. Look at us now, small grains, we sow, we sow, we sow. And it is because we sow that the youth will reap tomorrow. So Toxic Island perhaps, but I Lukuber, I bring my country into Monsieur Ringo’s house of dreams because it is Monsieur Ringo I call him now. Honneur et Respect to all Guadeloupeans, to all of those from the Caribbean, to all the good Soucoungans. Memory of our memories.

Ladies and gentlemen! Once upon a time! Krik! Krak! (177-178)
Lukuber recognizes the unavoidability of change (what Gifford calls “the recognition of a creative-destructive universe”) and explains that the past is therefore inextricably connected to the present, because to be cognizant of how present actions affect the future is what matters. To be aware of cultural and environmental toxic elements is key to assessing their effects. For example, the novel ends with a twist to the traditional oral story-telling Creole call to the audience (“Krik! Krak!”), thus linking the traditional past to a future with changes that will inevitably bring challenges. The twist is cleverly and subtly represented by Pépin who places an exclamation point after “Krik” instead of the traditional question mark. The selection of the exclamation point is surprising, but it is also upbeat: the fast-paced changes to the island’s environment and culture will have toxic effects if Guadeloupeans become oblivious to them. If instead, the islanders become aware of them, question them, and adapt them, then there is hope for nature and culture in a post-pastoral world. The novel ends where new stories told by Ringo’s friends begin with a newfound “awe attentive to the natural world.”

Williams’s *The Honest Folk of Guadeloupe* is constructed differently. His omniscient third-person narrator caters to a non-Caribbean audience. The chapters are all very short, and they juggle various plots: two crime investigations; the political intrigues of the island; the racial tensions; relatively taboo topics such as being homosexual; and Anne Marie’s personal life and how she struggles with being a divorced, working mother of two, having an affair with a married man who is not native to Guadeloupe, among others. Nature plays a significant role since a French tropical island with an exotic flavor is the reason tourists come to Guadeloupe. The novel is marked by allusions to Hurricane Hugo, how the tourist industry is barely making a comeback, and what an economic disaster it would be for the murder on a white French tourist woman to remain unsolved. Williams also strives to depict the likes and dislikes of the youth and how they express them. For example, Anne Marie’s teenage son, Fabrice, whose father is Guadeloupean, “spends his time watching the American channels on the satellite dish” (12), “listening to heavy metal on his Walkman” (25), or deriding his English teacher for not knowing what “zydeco” (267) is. 11 Together with his nine-year-old

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11 Zydeco is a Black American dance music originally from southern Louisiana, typically featuring accordion and guitar.
sister, Létitia, they are more than elated to be taken to lunch at McDonald’s, which “was located in the main street of Point-à-Pitre” (266) in a chapter aptly titled “Fast Food.” As young characters in the novel, they represent the modern-day youth of Guadeloupe who belong to a comfortable middle class. Contrary to Pépin, Williams offers a greater racial and social spectrum of characters, including many with non-heteronormative sexual preferences, thus encouraging the readers to think about who are these “honest folk of Guadeloupe” and their relationship to other French- and/or Creole-speaking islands (e.g., Martinique, Dominica, and Haiti). As with the two cases that Anne Marie is trying to solve, appearances are always deceiving and even when the mysteries have unraveled, there are no clear alternatives as to how to define a Guadeloupean “identity” through its culture. In fact the message is that, given the various races and ethnicities, sexual orientations, levels of use of Creole or French, to define what it is to be Guadeloupean remains elusive. Therefore, it is important to understand what should be considered as endogenous past cultural elements in order to reconfigure them for the twenty-first century. The novel has as a substantial backdrop the corruption of local politicians (elected and aspiring) as it relates to their disregard (mostly behind closed doors) for the environment. Could this vying for ill-acquired power and money be one of the traits of the elite of Guadeloupe? As ministries of the environment, tourism, culture, education, and justice, they get to dictate and enforce policies related to ecological issues, school curricula, and judicial processes. By the end of the novel, the two seemingly unrelated deaths reveal the elite’s lack of concern for Guadeloupe’s traditional cultural past and its ecological future. Could it be that they respond to the demands of higher powers in France?

In the novel, the process of identifying Guadeloupean culture runs parallel to determining what would constitute a collective/shared island space. The island is “scarred” because of the hurricane and the multiple construction projects, and it remains virtually impossible to know to whom to attribute the fault of these toxic ecological results. Williams uses the lush, tropical landscape as a way of exoticizing his novel, but also offers substantial historical, political, and cultural information. Anne Marie’s stream of consciousness notes the following as she is walking in the capital under the rain and wonders about the arbitrariness of some of the building projects.
Twenty years earlier [1970], when Anne Marie, young and newly married, had visited Point-à-Pitre for the first time, this part of the city had been a ghetto of wooden shacks lined haphazardly alongside the ditches where mosquitoes and glow-moths danced to the rhythm of tropical poverty, and where late at night the trucks collected buckets of malodorous night soil. In time, the mayor had had everything pulled down, replaced by the new town hall, the post office, and the social security buildings, concrete tokens of France’s determination to modernize the long forgotten colonial backwater.

For some reason this stretch of land, glistening now in the grey light of the afternoon clouds, had been left, overlooked by the politicians and the developers. (51-52)

Monsieur Desterres, whose name can be translated as “of the lands” and who is from Guadeloupe, seems to embody that stretch of land as he is an advocate for sound environmental projects but has been overlooked by all. He owns the symbolically named Mère Nature (Mother Nature) restaurant close to where the tourist, Evelyn Vaton, was found dead. The focus of the novel centers on the web of corruption and ambitions of local politicians and those who profit from the subsidies from France or from building projects pell-mell and who look the other way. At the onset of the novel/investigation, Desterres is depicted as a light-skinned mulatto ecologist from a well-to-do and established Guadeloupean family who has unsuccessfully run for office in local elections. His forceful environmental platform does not suit those politicians in power who profit from the tourism industry in spite of its detrimental/toxic effects to the island’s ecology. He comments that “the place [Guadeloupe] used to be very beautiful but it’s been raped, pillaged, transformed into a concrete suburb” (38). Because Dugain (whose name can be translated as “of profit”), Director of the Environmental Center, has committed suicide, Desterres is poised to take on that position, but he has a record of attempted rape with no conviction.

When Anne Marie first meets Desterres, she suspects he is withholding information about the suicide and the young woman found dead on the beach. Two policemen bring him back to her office in handcuffs and when she asks him if he knows Dugain, he answers the following:
I am interested in protecting this island’s heritage. Dugain chose to think of himself as an ecologist but like all politicians he was more interested in power than ecology, more interested in himself than in nature. . . . When I stood for election, he gave me his support. Dugain wanted power—and, of course, money. Ecology was a means for him—not an end. My approach worried him. . . . Dugain belonged to the old generation—the generation that believes progress is a fast car, more tarmac and ugly condominiums on pristine beaches. . . . The only thing Dugain took seriously was his power base. He was black and like all blacks he felt he had to show that he was just as good, if not better, than anybody else. (151-152)

Desterres reveals his views about Dugain as the Director of the Environment Centre and the racial tensions that exist on the island. Desterres considers himself to be a “mongrel” (152) from Guadeloupe and as such considered to be a “peasant” (152) by the people of Martinique (from where Dugain came).

Monsieur Trousseau, Anne Marie’s Indo-Caribbean greffier (secretary), sheds some further light on Dugain and the Ilet Noir oil refinery development:

. . . I do remember Dugain going on television and doing a series of programs about the possible danger of oil spills. His special interest’d always been the mangrove—which never endeared him to the building lobby, anyway. . . . Dugain was on the television, he was on the radio, he was in the papers—and then suddenly silence as if his power had been switched off. Strange . . . I know about the money to be made from setting up a new industry in a place like this, where forty percent of the population is unemployed. Government handouts—that’s what we live on. A lot of money to be made out of Ilet Noir. And Dugain was treading on a lot of people’s toes. (255-256)

He has to explain this project after Eric André, Anne Marie’s ex-brother-in-law and Director of the Tourist Bureau, has met with her to talk about Dugain. When he meets with Anne Marie, he volunteers toxic information related to Dugain’s mysterious suicide. He tells her that in order for Dugain to line his pockets, he had been favorable to the ecologically unsound Ilet Noir project. But Monsieur Trousseau provides Anne Marie with information on how the project of two years ago (1988) had been endorsed not by Dugain, but by André:
The préfet set up a council of wise men to deliberate over the whole Ilet Noir affair. At the time, they said it was an American consortium, Texaco or Esso. In fact it was Elf Aquitaine that wanted to install a refinery off the coast of Port Louis [sic], bringing the crude oil up from Venezuela. It would have meant a lot of jobs and it would have meant housing petroleum engineers coming out from France. Well-paid professionals from the mainland. The mayor of Port-Louis was for it—and of course the Office of Tourism. (255)

The specter of oil spills mobilized “the honest folk of Guadeloupe” who vehemently objected to the project and the politicians backed off from it. In the end, and after many false starts and declarations, readers understand that on this island, acquiring wealth and displaying it (BMW’s, expensive clothes), is paramount to having it made. The people, the beaches, the well-being of the island are second to being rich, very rich and that becoming a “Négropolitain” (“Blacks living in the métropole, who come back from the mainland for their summer vacation.” 35) is paramount to the pinnacle of success for those both on the island and the métropole.

As she solves the two cases, the readers also learn that other culturally acquired attitudes of those same “honest folk of Guadeloupe” are homophobia and prejudice toward people of alternative sexual preferences. As it turns out, the dead woman on the beach is not Evelyn Vaton, but a very light-skinned bisexual Guadeloupean, Agnès Loisel. She has returned to the island to impersonate Evelyn (a divorced nurse in France with a child) and to stage her disappearance, so that the child would collect insurance money, and the three of them could live with economic ease somewhere else. Instead, she overdoses with cocaine and dies in the back of Desterres’ restaurant. He decides to continue with the charade because, he had promised Dr. Geneviève Lecurieux, a Guadeloupean doctor and a “boy scout” (308), to help her friend Evelyn stage the disappearance. He had met the doctor many years ago when she had been active in the environmental causes on the island. He also did not like “the idea [that] cocaine was being used at his restaurant” (316), which is most unwelcomed to someone with political aspirations.

As for Dugain, twice-married with children and an ecological activist, Anne Marie discovers that he is a homosexual and since July 1988 has been diagnosed with a viral infection (282). He commits suicide, not because of the
accusation of misappropriating funds that would have entailed a fine he could have easily paid off, but because he does not want his carefully built heterosexual façade to crumble. Anne Marie suspects it is her ex brother-in-law, Eric André, who was blackmailing Dugain into dropping his anti-Ilet Noir project public crusade.

In the end, no one goes to jail and no secrets about heteronormative sexual preferences or extra marital affairs are revealed to the public. A Dominican immigrant killed in a shootout after holding hostages in a school was pegged with the murder of the tourist at the beach. And Madame Dugain continues to believe her husband, to whom she was happily married for 17 years and with whom she had had two children, was not ill but that “he was hounded by people who were jealous of his success” (321). Arnaud, Point-à-Pitre’s procureur, calls Anne Marie and suggests she should drop the Dugain case and stop bothering her brother-in-law. He also asks her to forget about Desterres and his statement and not to prosecute Evelyn Vaton for fraud. With veiled threats he asks her not to make enemies and suggests the following scenario which would suit all involved: “Desterres can be useful for the future well-being of this island. Our present préfet is not too keen on the way the shoreline is being transformed into hotel beaches and the département needs some ecology movement now that Rudolphe Dugain is dead. . .” (318).

Intolerance of alternative sexual preferences is a toxic element of the culture of the “honest folk of Guadeloupe” that bears an impact on official decisions affecting the environment. Williams seem to suggest that in the twenty-first century, this toxicity is no longer acceptable. Guadeloupeans should not have to emigrate or commit suicide because of their sexual preferences. It would be better for the collective “we” of a post-pastoral Guadeloupe to not be obsessed with the perceived moral decay, but to be receptive to the different sexualities “in attention to the natural word.”

Ernest Pépin and Timothy Williams fulfill Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert’s statement that there is a “growing apocalyptic strain in the region’s environmental thought, born of fears of that day…in which we may have to ask what happened not only to trees or the land, but to the region’s people” (“Caribbean Environmentalism”); and, one may add, to their culture. Pépin’s novel offers an impassioned appeal to the youth of the nation by using words in English, new sorts of music (still sung in French and Creole), poetry, traditional dishes
served in fast food establishments, and pan-African Diaspora heroes the youth must look up to. In other words, Guadeloupe, in spite of being dependent on France, can refashion its past with new tools in order to be understood by the young. Williams, with an outsider’s keen eye for observation, makes note of Guadeloupe’s environment and its culture of silencing. His novel captures the reality of this Overseas Department with people from other French islands, other former French colonies, different races, religions, and sexual preferences who have to coexist on a small island. Not all of Williams’s characters believe those in positions of power or authority are willing to endorse cultural changes that would benefit the environment. Jean-Michel, Anne Marie’s ex-husband, and an ardent pro-independence advocate, is depicted as an idealist ideologue held responsible for bombings in the 80s—which led to their divorce and severing her ties with the Guadeloupean-side of the family. Anne Marie questioning reveals the truth about these “honest folk of Guadeloupe” who prefer to pretend that the racial or sexual tensions are not toxic when in fact they affect all aspects of island life, especially the toxic ecological decisions made.

Christina Kullberg notes that “environment includes ‘interactions’ between the constitutive elements, which influence and transform life within it. This means that the environment takes into account social, historical, and cultural conditions. ‘Environment’ is hence a profoundly relational term, more specific and inclusive than the term space, which has been much used within francophone Caribbean studies” (15). This critical work on Pépin and Williams adheres to Kulberg’s notions that the environment is interactive and inclusive. The people of Guadeloupe, as depicted in both novels, realize that certain cultural inflections regarding their knowledge of nature (human and non-human) may be toxic. This work’s purpose, “to talk about a little ecocritical culture,” recognizes that cultural toxic elements are part of the “creative-destructive universe” of post-pastoral literature and as such are paradoxical in nature, yet are at the heart of how Guadeloupans conceive of their island environment. The novels’ representation of the environment gives credence to the “ecocritical premise that the natural environment is always a shaping force of individual and group psychology and identity—and that this force can only be ignored or suppressed at a price” (Armbuster and Wallace 7).

Guadeloupe’s culture is the result of many exogenous elements constantly forced to interact with each other while transculturation operates on them,
transforms them, and makes them Guadeloupean. The call for alarm comes from the accelerated rate at which these elements arrive and are imposed after 1946. Pépin harbors the hope that the youth will seek to insert Guadeloupe’s rich past within the greater ecological and cultural dialogue of the pan-African Diaspora. Williams reveals that the “honest folk of Guadeloupe” prefer to ignore that within their culture there exists more than the one heteronormative sexual preference. The novels “talk” about questioning and adapting a “little” culture before any of its elements are completely forgotten or blindly adopted, and by doing so, understand that interactions with the ecological knowledge of nature are part of the cultural conversation.
WORKS CITED


SARGASSO (2016-17, I & II)
“EL MANTO QUE CUBRE EL MAR”: RELIGION, IDENTITY, AND THE SEA IN RITA INDIANA’S
LA MUCAMA DE OMICUNLÉ

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Abstract

In her 2015 novel La mucama de Omicunlé, Rita Indiana combines science fiction and African-derived religious practices of the Caribbean in a narrative that traverses boundaries in time, class, and identity politics within the context of environmental disaster. This essay examines the use of the sea as a space of unity and division, death and regeneration, and analyses the multiple sexual, gender, and religious identities that the protagonist embodies. In so doing, it details the complex cultural and religious tapestry that Indiana weaves throughout her novel, a framework that centres on the multivalent nature of the many bodies—of water and people alike—that both join and divide the islands of the Caribbean.

Keywords: Caribbean literature, cultural practices, performance, Afro-Caribbean religions

Resumen

En su novela publicada en 2015, La mucama de Omicunlé, Rita Indiana une la ciencia ficción con las prácticas religiosas afrocaribeñas para escribir una narrativa, localizada en el contexto de un desastre medioambiental, que atraviesa las fronteras dentro de las nociones del tiempo, de las clases sociales y de las políticas identitarias. Este ensayo examina el uso del mar como espacio de unidad y división, de la muerte y la regeneración, y analiza las múltiples identidades sexuales, culturales y de género que encarna el protagonista. Así, detalla la rica complejidad del manto que teje Indiana en su novela con hilos de varias culturas y religiones, que juntos forman un marco narrativo que se centra en la polivalencia de los diversos cuerpos—tanto de agua como de personas—que conectan y separan las islas del Caribe.

Palabras clave: literatura caribeña, prácticas culturales, performance, religiones afro-caribeñas
In her 2015 novel, *La mucama de Omicunlé*, Dominican author Rita Indiana explores the multifaceted nature of African-derived and other religions in the Caribbean in a narrative that centres on the Caribbean Sea as indispensable for identity politics in the region. Her text explores the many complexities and competing interests that have long been manifest in the archipelago through a narrative that brings together the past, present, and future in the many bodies that both join and divide the islands and littoral areas of the region. Set in a dystopian not-too-distant future in which natural disasters and the policies of a totalitarian regime in the Dominican Republic have led to the complete destruction of the marine environment, the novel’s protagonist, Acilde Figueroa, is entrusted with the task of ensuring that the Caribbean Sea return to a functioning ecosystem, thereby restoring and protecting the realm of the Santería *orishas*, Yemayá and Olokún. Indiana has described this latest work in an interview with Daniel Alarcón as a move beyond her previous coming-of-age novels of *La estrategia de Chochueca*, *Papi*, and *Nombres y animales* to examine through the genre of science fiction some of the “crude contradictions” in Dominican and Caribbean society with regard to class disparity, violence, and the multiple layers of individual and community identity (00:15:50-17:55). In *La mucama de Omicunlé*, Indiana marries science fiction with African-derived religions in the Caribbean in a fashion that sees her protagonist render fluid the boundaries between these and divisions in time, class, and gender and sexual identities, all within the context of the fallout from a series of environmental catastrophes precipitated by a culture of violent bipartisanship and a lack of concern for the environment among twenty-first-century politicians and citizens.

In his review of the novel, Juan Duchesne Winter writes that it could be described as “una novela de ciencia-ficción *eco-queer,*” a not incorrect evaluation, to his mind, but one that he notes may do the novel a disservice by attempting to confine it to the strictures imposed by the notion of genre. Indeed, as Duchesne Winter suggests, the text lends itself to readings from a number of perspectives; two of these bear brief consideration here, not only for the introduction that they provide to potential avenues for further research into this recent novel, but also for their pertinence to this essay’s central theme: the importance and influence of African-derived religions in the
In her essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway argues that by the late twentieth century, we have all become cyborgs, “chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism,” whereby biotechnology has been incorporated into the body and reproduction has given way to replication (150). In this regard, the integration of technology into the body has become the norm in *La mucama de Omicunlé*, with Acilde touching her wrist to activate the *PriceSpy*, a data service that enables her to find the market value of any object she looks at and project the information into her field of vision. This technology also allows her to touch her palm to take a photograph of the object and send the image to another subscriber. Furthermore, as will be examined below, the process by which Acilde attempts to achieve the goal of saving the marine environment in the year 2027 involves replication at two points in the past, re-born by means of the sea as an adult man in 1991 (Giorgio) and a seventeenth-century buccaneer (Roque), both avatars of Acilde that are described using technological terms such as “update” and “fotocopia” (*La mucama* 110, 112). Importantly, this replication goes hand-in-hand with Acilde’s simultaneous initiation as an *omo Olokún*—child of Olokún—and fulfilment of the protagonist’s long-held ambition to transition from a woman to a man using the drug Rainbow Bright. Haraway writes that “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” and her description of cyborg imagery as a means to move beyond the dualisms that we have used to explain our bodies is equally relevant here (149). Not only does Acilde traverse and dismantle the dualisms of gender, sexual identity, and class throughout the novel, he appropriates the power to define himself and the world around him as he desires, rather than leave this power to be wielded by those who have defined

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1 As evidenced below, of particular note are the ways in which Indiana weaves together her exploration of complex identity politics and the environment with that of African-derived religions and ritual practices in the Caribbean. In light of Duchesne Winter’s description of the novel, this is particularly important as the symbolism contained by many of Indiana’s references may not be immediately obvious to readers less familiar with these religious traditions.

2 The manner in which the author complicates the oft-used trope in Caribbean literature of three generations of women who tell the past through their respective stories can be read in light of scholarship on Afro-futurism and the politics of race in science fiction (see, for example, Marleen Barr’s edited volume, *Afro-Future Females*). For Indiana, these three generations go from future to past, beginning with a transgender male who passes knowledge backwards in time to his male avatars to then influence the future.
In keeping with Indiana’s practice in the novel, throughout this essay Acilde will be referred to using female personal and possessive pronouns (she/her/hers) prior to her transition, and male pronouns (he/him/his) afterwards.

In addition to “Pharmaco-pornographic Politics: Towards a New Gender Ecology” cited here, see also Testo Yongui (also available in English translation as Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era), all published as Beatriz Preciado.
ing the second stanza of Ariel’s song from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* as her epigraph:

> Full fathom five thy father lies,  
> Of his bones are coral made,  
> Those are pearls that were his eyes,  
> Nothing of him that doth fade,  
> But doth suffer a sea-change,  
> into something rich and strange.  
> Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell, Ding-dong.  
> Hark! Now I hear them, ding-dong, bell. (*La mucama* 9)

Signalling the destruction that has been wrought by the two-year rainstorm “La Llorona” followed by the tsunami of 2024 that emptied Venezuelan biological weapons housed at Ocoa by the Dominican government into the Caribbean Sea, the song introduces the “sea-nymphs”—that is, Acilde, Giorgio, and Roque as children of Olokún and Yemayá—who both undergo “a sea-change into something rich and strange” and will carry out the necessary “sea-change” the novel depicts. The first chapter is entitled “Olokun,” master of the sea in the Regla de Ocha tradition, and thus the text begins by immediately stating the frame of reference for the narrative as one in which Santería and the orishas of the sea are actors in the transformation it will describe. Indeed, the title of the novel, *La mucama de Omicunlé*, is the first of these references: the santera for whom Acilde works as a maid, Esther Escudero, was given the ritual name Omicunlé upon her initiation into Santería as a daughter of Yemayá, a term for which Esther gives the meaning as “el manto que cubre el mar” (23).

As Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui underlines in *Los orishas en Cuba*, Olokún is an androgynous orisha who is part woman/man, part fish, and whose considerable powers can both heal and mortally wound (148-151). Acilde’s transition from female to male in the narrative present and replication as two male avatars are the past is laid out later in the novel, but even here in the first chapter there are numerous indications of the similarities between the protagonist and Olokún. As her mother’s seventh child, Acilde’s birth is marked by the orisha’s identification with the number seven, itself a further reference to the sea

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5 In the interests of clarity: “el manto que cubre el mar” can be translated into English as “the mantle that covers the sea.”
through the popular concept of the “seven seas.” Olokún’s association with duality and multiplicity, particularly the number seven, is such that his attributes are described as “siete caretas, siete cadenas…. Le pertenecen dos manos de caracoles; muñecas de dos caras. También monedas…en número de siete y múltiplos de siete” (Bolívar Aróstegui 148). Although Olokún is described in the novel as “el de las siete perfecciones” (68), the patakí or ritual myth that is told of him also speaks of his imperfections in the eyes of the wider community. In love with Orisha-Oko, Olokún is rejected by his love interest when the latter “vio que tenía defectos en su naturaleza y se lo dijo al mundo” (Bolívar Aróstegui 147). For her part, Acilde was abandoned soon after birth and left with her maternal grandparents who never accepted her gender or sexual identity. She was then humiliated as a teenager when they sought to “cure” her of her masculine ways and held her down while a neighbour raped her. Having both been publicly scorned, Olokún flees to the depths of the ocean and Acilde to the barrios surrounding el Mirador in Santo Domingo. Once there, “Acilde mamaba huevos…, sin quitarse la ropa, bajo que su cuerpo—de diminutos pechos y caderas estrechas—pasaba por el de un chico de quince años” (La mucama 14). As noted above, it is her boyish looks that are the source of attraction for her clients and her androgynous appearance—a direct link to Olokún—that leads to her encounter with Eric Vitier. The relationship between the two then culminates in Acilde’s transition to a man and simultaneous initiation as omo Olokún.

Along with Esther, Eric is also an initiated child of Yemayá who, fulfilling the role denoted by his ritual name Omioloyu—“los ojos de Yemaya”—finds in Acilde the one destined to serve the two orishas and so introduces her to Esther (68). Yemayá, like Olokún, is an orisha of the sea, but also that of motherhood. Importantly, Acilde comes to consider Esther the caring grandmother she never had, cementing in a certain fashion the familial bonds in the physical world that exist in the spiritual one: though born of Olokún, Yemayá is the mother of the orishas, and Esther reinforces this two-way bond by presenting Acilde with a necklace of blue beads dedicated to Olokún that she had brought from Brazil, home of the related African-derived religion of Candomblé and notably, given that Olokún is “el mar mismo,” situated across the sea. At this point, Esther tells Acilde that she would inherit her house, which, as the reader later observes, is not the physical abode where they currently live. Rather, it is the house of Yemayá, the sea, the residence of Olokún—“el dueño de lo desconocido”—and the
means through which Acilde will travel back in time, into the unknown, to carry out the very will of the *orishas* (28).

Moreover, as Solimar Otero foregrounds in her discussion of Lydia Cabrera’s work, Yemayá is associated with “queerly gendered and sexualized spiritual beings” (98). Through initiation, Acilde will be born of both Olokún and Yemayá, becoming *omo Olokún* with Esther as his spiritual *madrina* and Eric performing the ceremony. This moment of spiritual transformation is also the point at which Eric administers the Rainbow Bright and performs the necessary medical procedures, enabling Acilde to undergo the desired physical transformation from a female to male body and become “el nuevo Acilde” (*La mucama* 69). This completed, Eric removes from its container the sea anemone that had long been kept alive on Esther’s altar to Yemayá and places it on Acilde’s scalp, which, newly shaven, now clearly exhibits the crown of moles that confirms his status as the “hijo legítimo de Olokun” (68). Having connected the stinging tentacles with each mole, the anemone serves as the gateway for Acilde’s replication in the past and is symbolic on multiple levels: not only does its disappearance from its natural habitat and consequent high value on the black market speak to the environmental and monetary costs of the future the novel sets out for the region, but in reference to Acilde’s specific experience, sea anemones are known for varying degrees of hermaphroditism and potential asexual reproduction.

Although not necessarily the case for the anemone in question—*condylactis gigantea*, also the title of the chapter in which the abovementioned procedures and rites are set out—it is notable that Acilde’s first avatar is born from an anemone as an adult man, Giorgio, in 1991. He is welcomed to his new life on Playa Bo, Sosúa, with a specific indigenous rite that has been passed from generation to generation in order to greet “al que viene del agua”: having uttered the Taíno words “Bayacú Bosiba Guamikení,” Nenuco and his wife Anani, descendants of the indigenous Arawak of the island, “[m]etieron el cuerpo en la pileta con suma suavidad. Lo sumergieron hasta el cuello y echaron leche de coco con una jícara sobre los lunares que hacían círculo en su coronilla” (102). Bayacú, Bosiba, and Guamikení are honorific terms, similar to those given within the context of Santería in the novel, and in this way Indiana uses both ritual language and names to reinforce the heterogeneous framework she creates in the novel. Naming serves an important role since, following the welcome, Acilde’s
avatar makes the direct mental connection to Acilde while having sex with Yararí, Nenuco, and Ananí’s daughter, an experience that mirrors Acilde’s access to the ritual knowledge held by the Santería community in 2027 via her sexual interaction with Eric. At the point of ejaculation, he mutters the name Acilde Figueroa and “su mente, reaccionando al password, hizo asequibles todos sus contenidos” (109). With this connection now forged, he chooses the name Giorgio Menicucci, Giorgio from the synth and electronic dance music pioneer Giorgio Moroder and Menicucci from Acilde’s Italian father for whom he had long searched, thereby solidifying in his avatar’s surname the legitimacy that Acilde had sought.

Playa Bo serves as the other main site of action in the novel, and it is here that the conservation and eco-tourism project that Giorgio develops with his wife Linda, a rich heiress and environmental activist, is situated. However, as noted, the venture is the first step in Giorgio’s and Acilde’s attempt to avoid the future destruction of the marine environment. Like Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s and Arcadio Díaz Quiñones’s respective theorizations of the waters of the Caribbean in La isla que se repite and La memoria rota, to name just two examples among the many reflections on the theme from scholars and authors across the region, the sea in Indiana’s novel is also imbued with multiple meanings as the source and representation of unity and division, death and regeneration, (dis)inheritance and legacy. In 2024, the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic coasts of the islands became a site of death and complete destruction after a tsunami swept the biological weapons housed at Ocoa into the water and decimated the neighbourhoods along Santo Domingo’s malecón. The presence of these Venezuelan munitions on Dominican soil was the result of a treaty signed between these two “estados totalitarios” on opposite shores of the Caribbean Sea, both members of a larger group of similar regimes across the region, “la Alianza Bolivariana Latinoamericana” (113). However, the consequence of these political alliances and associated conflicts is that the means through which the region is linked, the sea itself, is now “un caldo oscuro y putrefacto” whose only surviving specimens of flora and fauna are to be found in artificial, controlled environments (114). The project that Giorgio and Linda launch not only seeks to avoid the deleterious effects for the house of Olokún and Yemayá, but also sees Indiana directly invoke what Elizabeth DeLoughrey et al. have summarised as “the role of literature in forging an environmental imagination in the Carib-
bean” and situate her novel within the increasing body of literary and scholarly works examining this issue (13).

In her book chapter “Caribbean Utopias and Dystopias,” Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert examines the impact of writers’ and artists’ engagement in “ecological activism,” whereby “their compelling exploration of the environmental dilemmas facing the islands” is not only an indicator of the urgency of the situation but is a call for “positive environmental change” (114). Drawing on texts from across the archipelago, Paravisini-Gebert cites as but two of these dilemmas the washing of topsoil into the sea in Haiti as a result of deforestation—thus threatening marine habitats—and the contamination of the waters surrounding Vieques in Puerto Rico due to the actions of the US Navy. Geographically situated between the two, the Dominican Republic of Indiana’s novel comes to represent the future Caribbean dystopia that Paravisini-Gebert’s title connotes, with the ecological disaster that renders uninhabitable its waters and those of the Atlantic coastlines to the north a direct consequence of military policy in the region. The destruction of the marine environment thus wrought is irreversible in the narrative present of the novel, yet the sea in this text, as elsewhere, represents the complexity and interconnectedness of the islands of the region, as noted above. The restoration of its waters and habitats is of paramount importance, therefore, not only for the future ecological viability of the Caribbean, but also in order to permit the continued practice of religious traditions that are so closely tied to a functioning and diverse ecosystem.7

6 Elizabeth DeLoughrey examines the engagement of Caribbean and Pacific Island authors with the consequences of militarization on islands and the waters that surround them in Roots and Routes: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literature and more recently, in the latter case, in “Heliotropes: Solar Ecologies and Pacific Radiations.”

7 Indeed, as Paravisini-Gebert underlines in “He of the Trees,” there is “an organic relationship between humans and the environment” in Haitian Vodou and other African-derived religions and traditions in the Caribbean, one which is explored in many literary texts from across the region (193). In this book chapter, she also foregrounds author Mayra Montero’s exploration of spirituality and vulnerable environments in Ti, la oscuridad through the search for the almost extinct Eleuthrodactylis sanguineus or blood frog, whose disappearance, like that of the sea anemone in La mucama de Omicunlé, is indicative of the dangers posed for the relationship between nature, the orishas or lwa—the equivalent term used in Vodou—and their human servitors. For further discussion of this and other close connections between literature, the environment and Caribbean culture, see DeLoughrey et al.’s edited volume, Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture.
In this regard—and as has been demonstrated—the religious framework constructed in *La mucama de Omicunlé* is inextricably linked to the same multivalent waters. Yet, the tapestry of religious practices and traditions that Indiana weaves serves to exemplify a further level of interconnectedness across the region, albeit one that is often a site of conflict. In addition to Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé, and the indigenous rites in relation to the sea, Indiana incorporates into the text a series of references to other religions and spiritual practices from across the region. Most notably, the narrative is framed by the dictatorial president Said Bona’s espousal of Santería and imposition of what is variously termed “el vudú dominicano” or “las 21 Divisiones y su mezcla de deidades africanas y santos” as the republic’s official religion (113, 59). Moreover, through the weekly spiritual consultations between the president and Esther prior to her death, Acilde’s madrina is able to wield considerable power with the head of state and so ensure the continuation of Acilde’s mission from his prison cell. Towards the novel’s close, one member of the artists’ collective founded at Giorgio and Linda’s house on Playa Bo—a group comprised of individuals with links to other islands, the US, and Europe—incorporates the rhythms and melodies of Dominican-Haitian Gagá ritual into the diverse musical arrangement she mixes for the exhibit’s opening night. Her interest in this religious practice among the Haitian and Haitian-Dominican braceros who cut sugarcane in the Dominican countryside stems from her visit to a Holy Week ceremony in La Romana, a centre of Gagá performance.8

As these examples show, the narrative takes place in a religious framework that reaches far beyond the borders of the Dominican Republic. This context reflects the extent to which the entire region will be affected by the consequences of political alliances and conflicts between authoritarian regimes and the resultant environmental catastrophe. Importantly, Indiana does not present

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8 Anthropologists June Rosenberg and José Francisco Alegría-Pons both studied Gagá performance in La Romana in their respective research, work on which another of Mayra Montero’s novels, *Del rojo de su sombra*, draws, as the latter’s dedication demonstrates (11). In this regard, Indiana cited Alegría-Pons as a source for her novel during a reading and question and answer session at Syracuse University on 24 April 2015. Furthermore, although this essay focuses on African-derived religious practices in the novel, Indiana’s narrative also portrays the activities of the Pentecostal “Siervos del Apocalipsis,” who in 2027 have been designated a terrorist organization in the Dominican Republic, and the recurrent Catholic iconography in the artwork of Argenis, another member of the artists’ collective (59).
this network as a panacea with which to resolve the future political and social ills her novel depicts: as in many contemporaneous works by Caribbean authors, there is a concern with presenting a complex view of religious practices in the region. The relationship between Esther and Said Bona, and the fact that her, Eric’s, and Acilde’s intervention in the past was only made possible by the dictatorial president’s espousal of Santería and imposition of “Dominican Vodou” upon the Republic, is one such example. Furthermore, their connection with their Afro-Hispanic heritage and the link between these practices and those across the border in Haiti has not led to closer ties with Haitians themselves; quite the opposite occurs, in fact, as, upon sight or electronic detection, Haitians in Santo Domingo are automatically scanned for “el virus,” then showered with a lethal gas and collected by Chinese-made garbage trucks (11-12). Taken from the opening pages of the novel, this speaks directly to the on-going crisis facing Dominicans of Haitian descent in the country of their birth. In 2013, the Constitutional Court of the Dominican Republic upheld a ruling that resulted in many Dominicans of Haitian descent being stripped of their Dominican nationality, a decision that has then led to an increase in the deportation of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent to Haiti. The presence and treatment of Haitian migrants and their Dominican-born descendants has long been a source of conflict in the Dominican Republic, an issue of great importance to Indiana, as her journalistic work and fiction both evidence. Of particular note in this regard is her novel Nombres y animales, a text in which Indiana explores the precarious nature of life for this marginalised group in Dominican society. La mucama de Omicunlé, however, takes the current removal of an entire population’s citizenship rights to a logical future conclusion: as stateless individuals, their humanity is negated and so they can be eliminated and treated as trash. Within the larger framework of the novel, therefore, the network of religious traditions that traverses numerous boundar-

9 Karen Jaime examines Indiana’s exploration in the latter’s music video “Da pa’ lo’ do’” of the longstanding complex issues surrounding Dominican perceptions of race, with particular reference to the propagation of an anti-Haitian identity and to the space of the Dominican-Haitian border. Jaime contextualises her discussion in part by using Indiana’s article “Magia negra,” published in the Spanish newspaper El País on 9 October 2013 following the abovementioned ruling by the Constitutional Court of the Dominican Republic, in which Indiana highlights the historical context of the decision and competing discourses surrounding Haitian, Dominican, and Haitian-Dominican identity politics.
ies in both national and personal identity politics serves—much like the sea—as a site of conflict and shared identity, demise, and regeneration.

Returning to Acilde’s replication in the past by means of the sea, the appearance of his second avatar Roque transpires due to the artist Argenis brushing in 2001 against the same anemone from which Giorgio was born. The result is that both are replicated in the seventeenth century, Acilde as the leader of an all-male group of seventeenth-century buccaneers and Argenis as a castaway who joins them. For both of these characters, the experience of being stung by the anemone and acquiring an avatar is a visceral one, and similarities exist between this process and that of spirit possession in traditions such as Santería, Vodou, and Gagá. Possession by an orisha or lwa—the equivalent term used in Vodou and Gagá—is a corporeal experience during which the spirit mounts or inhabits a devotee’s body, thereby allowing the orisha or lwa to interact with servitors in the physical world. Furthermore, during the replication process Acilde and Argenis are both required to lie down, in seclusion, for extended periods over several days, itself similar in notion to the time traditionally set aside for this as part of initiation rites in Santería and Vodou.10

When viewed within the religious construct in the novel, therefore, the process through which Acilde inhabits the bodies of Giorgio and Roque can be seen as analogous to possession, even though Acilde is not an orisha. Moreover, as a devotee of Olokún, Acilde’s body is a conduit for the orisha and thus he inhabits his avatars’ bodies both as Acilde and Olokún. In this way, the three not only serve as a vehicle for the orisha’s manifestation in the physical world, but in so doing also mirror Olokún’s and Yemayá’s own qualities as orishas linked both with creation and with the continual development of varying gender and sexual identities.

Acilde’s multiple identities as himself, Giorgio, and Roque echo the way in which the orishas have numerous caminos or avatars. Yemayá, protective mother orisha in one camino, is the messenger of Olokún in another, and a fierce and

10 In reference to Santería, see, for example, Murphy’s discussion of isolation as part of the process of initiation, including periods spent lying down, in Santería: African Spirits in America (84-91), or Cros Sandoval’s explanation of the rituals associated with initiation in Worldview, the Orichas, and Santeria: Africa to Cuba and Beyond (93-101); with regard to Vodou, see, among others, Brown’s explanation of initiation and the periods of seclusion it requires in Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn (350-356), or Murrell’s Afro-Caribbean Religions (84-88).
vengeful warrior in yet another. Further, the original twinning the reader observes of Acilde reborn from the water as Giorgio reflects not only the nature of Yemayá born from Olokún, but also that of the twin orisha, the Ibeji or Ibeji. A boy and a girl born to Changó and Ochún, they are adopted by Yemayá who raises them as her own; similarly, Esther, *omo Yemayá*, becomes the mother figure for Acilde, who in the various ways outlined above embodies numerous gender identities. Indiana's protagonist ultimately has three avatars, which is notable given the religious framework the author constructs. In Haitian Vodou, the equivalent of the Ibeji are the Marasa, twin *lwa* who as the Marasa Twa have three iterations. Invested with considerable power, they seek to resolve conflict, and the third ‘twin’ as it were, the *dosou/dosa* with whom power resides, illustrates what Toni Pressley-Sanon describes as, “the attendant third element/space/moment of resolution or completeness through creativity,... which is also integral to the marasa concept” (119). The closing paragraph of Indiana’s novel points to this resolution, though not necessarily the one the reader expects. Declining to forewarn the future president upon their meeting of the disasters that would befall the country, Giorgio chooses to sacrifice the avatars of Roque and Acilde and transfer the self from the narrative present in 2037, having now spent ten years in prison, to the life he leads in 2001. Acilde and Roque both take their own lives and, at that moment, Giorgio “*se olvidará de Acilde, de Roque, incluso de lo que vive en un hueco allá abajo en el arrecife*” (*La mucama* 180). It is left to the reader to decide if the future crisis is averted, or indeed whether or not Acilde’s death marks that very resolution. What is clear, however, is that for Acilde and his unpredictable crowning orisha Olokún, the *dosou/dosa* of the Marasa Twa, the moment of completeness, is to continue as Giorgio in order to forget the rejection and pain Acilde feels in the future and thus, perhaps concomitantly mitigate Olokún’s own suffering at the hands of Orisha-Oko.

To conclude, in *La mucama de Omicunlé*, Rita Indiana foregrounds the multivalent nature of the many bodies—of water and people alike—that both join and divide the islands of the Caribbean, forms which constitute sites of conflict and both shared and developing identities. The multiple bodies that Indiana’s protagonist inhabits as a single subjectivity can be framed as those of a cyborg in Haraway’s terms, both through their incorporation of technology and as corporeal spaces that challenge and move beyond the dualisms
so often imposed on gender, sexuality, and class. Furthermore, to reference Beatriz Preciado, these processes of self-identification and replication are biopolitical and -technological techniques in which Acilde actively participates and the meaning of which he shapes. Drawing these together within the heterogeneous religious framework she constructs, Indiana weaves together the complexities of gender, sexual, and broader identity politics both within the Dominican Republic and across the region—past, present, and future—in a narrative that itself becomes the multifaceted titular omicunlé, that is el manto que cubre el mar.
WORKS CITED


“El manto que cubre el mar”


Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s *Dance on the Volcano* presents the life of a young singer, Minette, born of a slave mother and her white master, as she entertains the Port-au-Prince masses at the Comédie theater in the years leading up to the start of the Haitian Revolution in 1791.

Passing as white and with a privileged voice, Minette struggles with her identity in a plantation taxonomy of slaves, mulattos, freed blacks or “affranchis,” poor whites, French occupiers, and white planter elites. Called “the young person,” Minette earns fame and demands a contract from the theater’s white board while learning about the plight of runaway slaves from leaders of an insurgency. Her talent is her passport through pre-revolution Haitian society.

Of course, Minette has many admirers who toss flowers and love notes on stage as the curtain falls: a poor white artist wants to paint her portrait; a gallant French soldier on horseback comes to her aid; a fellow company actor wallows in unrequited love. Minnette eventually gives herself to a slaveholding freedman, Jean-Baptiste Lapointe, who fatally stabs a drunken white sailor and saves her from assault. While she admires his agency, she loathes his torturing of slaves to keep them in line and him in power.

 Appropriately titled *Dance on the Volcano*, the plot follows Minette’s artistic career and the tensions it causes the racial caste system. It isn’t until the final pages that the volcano erupts and blood flows from revolutionary violence. Here peripheral figures to the novel, but giants in the history of Haiti, quickly strike to liberate a nation. But from whom?
The torturous deaths of Vincent Ogé and Jean-Baptiste Chavannes in 1791 ignite revolt against the colonial powers. Alexander Pétion leads freedmen in the name of the Confederates of Croix de Bouquets, André Rigaud commands troops in the south, and throughout the country, slaves heed the call of the 
\textit{lambi} horn and rise up in vengeance.

The volcano, which for years the planters did not believe existed, was erupting. Like lava and ashes, the slaves poured from the hills, left the workhouses and the forests as if vomited up a crater. Armed, they took their turn bringing weapons down over and over, without mercy… (473)

In the ensuing tumult in Port-au-Prince, Minette suffers a stab wound and dies. For his part, Lapointe, as if a dictator, declares himself head of the National Guard and in charge of the national police. The novel closes with the image of a blood-soaked Lapointe, laughing demonically after slitting the throats of thirty whites. He then turns his town of Arcahaie over to the English.

By ending her novel at the dawn of the Haitian Revolution, Vieux-Chauvet points to how leadership as modeled by Lapointe has had lingering consequences. Lapointe, an anarchist, “took neither one side nor the other side and was content with selfish satisfactions” (243). Likewise, Francois Duvalier, dictator of Haiti when this novel was first published in 1957, was just one in a long line of despots who kept a boot on Haitians’ throats.

Even today, as I write this review, Guy Phillippe, who led a coup against then-President Jean Bertrand Aristide in 2004, pleaded guilty in Miami to laundering between $1.5 and $3.5 million in drug money from 1993 to 2003. Phillippe won an election in November to the Haitian Senate, but was arrested and extradited to the U.S. before he could be sworn in and claim immunity.

Sadly, Vieux-Chavet’s hero still serves as an archetype for political leaders in Haiti.

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“It’s the Crust That Keeps Us Alive: Review Article of *San Juan Noir*”

When I was asked if I would review *San Juan Noir*, a new collection of Puerto Rican short stories published by Akashic Books in October, 2016, I hesitated and almost said no. I had not written about Puerto Rican literature for many years and I was not certain I could do justice to these stories. I would be, in a sense, parachuting in . . . like a tourist. As soon as I began reading, however, I felt that I had returned home to a place that was both very familiar yet deeply disquieting, echoing the experience of at least two protagonists in these stories who travel to San Juan after many years away. So yes, like Ernesto Quiñones’ character Julio in “Turistas,” I am returning to the Island and I too am experiencing some vertigo and confusion. Julio, an ”outsider from Spanish Harlem, the mainland,” (137) visits San Juan to search for his father, ”the Capeman,” who abandoned him and his mother many years ago. He leaves after having been fleeced by two local con artists, and with no clear answers. Nonetheless, much has been revealed to him, just as much has been revealed to me. Although I began by worrying that I might not know what to write about *San Juan Noir*, I now find myself tripping over my words, wondering how I will be able to say it all: Where to begin?

Edited by Mayra Santos-Febres, one of Puerto Rico’s best-known contemporary writers, *San Juan Noir* is one of the latest additions to a series of noir fiction published by Akashic Books, an independent, small press based in Brooklyn. Some 79 collections of short stories have appeared in the series since *Brooklyn Noir* was released in 2004, and 16 more are listed as forthcoming. *San Juan Noir* is the first book in the series to be published in two languages, English and Spanish, in two separate editions. Most of the stories were originally written in Spanish and translated by Will Vanderhyden, while three of the stories were written in English and translated for the Spanish edition by one of the writers, Alejandro Alvarez Nieves. Other Latin American and Caribbean contributions to the series include *Havana Noir* (2007), *Trinidad Noir* (2008), *Mexico City Noir* (2010), *Haiti Noir* (2010), *Kingston Noir* (2012), and *Manila Noir* (2013). Each book showcases short stories set in a different

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1 Throughout this essay, I will quote from the original language edition of each story.
city or country, so that readers are treated to a literary “world tour” with local writers guiding us through their city or region. Unlike most touring companies, however, this series takes us beyond the plastic hotels and sightseeing bus rides to explore the deep underside of each locale, the cracks and fissures, violence and injustice that subtend contemporary urban life everywhere.

In her introduction to *New Orleans Noir: The Classics* (2016), Julie Smith suggests that “noir is about a life — or a predicament — in which everything’s gone to hell and there’s no way out (14). Indeed, as Véronique Desnain explains in her discussion of French fiction, contemporary noir seems to reach far beyond traditional crime fiction, taking readers to a much more unsettling place, where unlocking the crime is no longer the driving force of the narrative (2). Instead of a legitimate representative of a meaningful structure of law and order pursuing an individual criminal mind, contemporary noir explores the general “dysfunctionality” of the society in question, making this literature much more of a social and political critique. As Desnain explains: “Les auteurs du roman policier engagé . . . proposent au contraire de mettre en lumière les dysfonctionnements de la société. . . . l’intrigue joue un rôle minime, justice est rarement faite, et il faut chercher ailleurs que dans la confirmation rassurante de l’ordre établi les motivations à la fois de l’auteur et du lecteur” (2). As such, this fiction reveals and denounces a false and corrupt social order (Desnain 4), all the while shaking up the conventional narrative structure of the crime novel. Whereas readers of traditional crime fiction expect a linear narrative leading them, one clue at a time, to a closed ending, contemporary noir fiction introduces the reader to subjective narrative voices, second person narrative voices, circular narratives, and other stylistic innovations (Desnain 5–6). Thus, satisfactory endings and familiar structures are typically dismantled in this fiction.

Much of what Desnain describes in her account of contemporary French noir fiction is immediately apparent in the San Juan stories as well, with perhaps one notable difference. In our stories, the importance of the crime is not only diminished, but the nature of the crime itself is often hopelessly blurred, and the investigation, if there is one, does not expose false truths or false social orders. In the 14 stories that make up *San Juan Noir*, no lie or secret corruption is uncovered because none remains hidden. The rot lies everywhere and all the reader can do is catch an occasional glimpse of a suffering and trapped
character who might want to do something resembling the “right thing,” but who never really manages to do it. Our protagonists, who are also often the narrators of these tales, are hopelessly flawed, weak, or pathetic. Readers are toyed with, manipulated, made anxious and insecure in our inability to “see” or to “understand,” and structures of law and order are not only always already corrupt, they are mostly completely absent.

If a representative of the state appears at all, he is usually a pathetic and secondary character, often the object of derision, mocked by a pitiless narrative voice, like “el obeso de Saturnino, el policía de la lujuria” in Wilfredo J. Burgos Matos’ “La espada de San Miguel” (88). Saturnino joins forces with the main character, Ángel, who tries to investigate his own shooting with the help of a third friend, Felicia, only to find in the end that he is already dead. We think he was shot by his lover Ramiro while yet another character performed fellatio on his dying body: “La Ivette me vino con el cuento de que Alejandro te lo había mamado cuando estabas en tu lecho de muerte” (87). If a character finds peace, it is a rare and illusory moment: a young boy brings relief to his violated mother, but only after having brutally executed his drunken father, guilty of his own vicious murder. There is “A Killer Among Us” as Manuel A. Meléndez titles his story, but in the end, we cannot decide who the “killer” really is. Similarly, in Mayra Santos Febres’ “Apareamientos,” Koala, a hired hit man who kills indiscriminately (he doesn’t really like killing women but will do it anyway), falls in love for the first time with La Pastora, a competing crime boss he is sent to execute. She is smarter than he is and orders him shot, but he accepts his own death with equanimity, sadly satisfied for life by one erotic but imaginary moment of lovemaking: “Ya puedes matarme” (72).

As these stories move through the different neighbourhoods and social strata of San Juan, from decrepit Río Piedras to sordid Santurce, through the hotels and beach resorts of Condado to the restored artifice of Old San Juan, we are thrown off, again and again. In Ana María Fuster Lavín’s “Dos muertes para Ángela,” a first person dreamlike narration introduces us to lost and lonely people (person?) who are (is?) smart and thoughtful but also perhaps murderous and despicably violent. We do not really know why, but we are overwhelmed with sadness at the end of the story. In “Comida de peces,” by Manolo Núñez Negrón, and “Las cosas que se cuentan al caer,” by Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, highly manipulative narrative voices string us along, involving
us in a complicit acceptance of unacceptable things, and we don’t really even notice until it is all over. Núñez Negrón’s university educated narrator makes us think he cares for his childhood friend, an addict and junkie who never shared in his middle class privilege. However, the story begins with the title, “Comida de peces,” and ends with a strangely dispassionate discussion of the torture and mutilation the friend experienced before being killed by hired thugs: “Solo espero, a estas alturas, que antes de cercenarle las extremidades lo hayan asesinado, para evitarle la agonía. Pero los matones a sueldo suelen ser muy sádicos, y tienen sus métodos. No hay manera de saberlo (41, my emphasis). The story ends with these lines, a literary shrug of the shoulders that trivializes the life and death of a tragic young man who becomes “fish food.”

Arroyo Pizarro’s tale, “Las cosas que se cuentan al caer,” makes the reader equally complicit, this time using a clever second person narration to draw the reader in while providing an ironic commentary on the main character. At first we follow the nameless man as he tries to find out what happened to a murdered woman whose corpse he spotted from a plane while landing at Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport. However, as he inserts himself into the police investigation and befriends the family of the victim, we begin to suspect that all is not well: he seems obsessed with the crime and with pinning the murder on the victim’s lesbian friend. He betrays a disquieting voyeuristic “knowledge” of lesbian sex when he tries to justify his accusations to local police: “Explicas cómo las mujeres gays utilizan las manos para dar y recibir placer: la yema de los dedos y las uñas para tentar, uso de la palma para frotar, el tallo de la extremidad para acariciar. . . . Su amante lésbica, al saber que ella no se divorciaría . . . se volvió como loca” (126). For the longest time, we readers think that we are witnessing the workings of a reasonable mind who will discover who really killed Violeta, only to realize at the end that we have rooted for a character who is really quite hateful, maybe even dangerous, full of contempt and prejudice for the people around him. And he gets the last word.

Many of the characters in San Juan Noir are unlikeable; they are often not “good” people. Edmaris Carazo’s female protagonist in “Dentro y fuera” speaks well and sounds both attractive and smart, until we realize that she too is full of contempt for those around her. She is angry with her lover for compromising her by involving her in a drug deal, but urges him to leave the scene of a hit and run so they will not get caught driving drunk with drugs in the car. She
tells him (mistakenly) that they have hit a vagrant and: “nadie va a investigar tres carajos. Arranca y vámonos” (165). Miguel wants to take the victim to the hospital, but he listens to her and they drive off. Even if we do like certain characters, such as Tere Dávila’s unfortunate Chin Fernández, or the hapless hotel employee Daniel in Alejandro Álvarez Nieves’ “La felina dulce,” they are simply “screwed” before they even get started. And of course, the math teacher in José Rabelo’s “Y” struggles to control his sexual obsession with a student only to succumb in the end, going back to find her at the bar that gives the story its title. The reader sympathizes with him, but nothing in this story is “right,” beginning with a mother who asks her daughter to prostitute herself to support her in her old age.

For readers and characters alike, San Juan Noir is a platform of quicksand, and the story that most dramatizes this leitmotif is the one Mayra Santos-Febres chose to open the collection: Janette Becerra’s “Muerte en el andamio.” A truly horrific tale, it is set in Santa Rita, a prosperous neighborhood near the University of Puerto Rico where our protagonist lives high up in a condominium she rarely leaves. Becerra’s narrator raises orchids and listens to classical music; she is controlled and quiet, a most “civilized” and “intellectual” voice, speaking convincingly to an audience (“Uds.”) in intimate and knowing terms. We know she is a woman because of Spanish grammar (“estoy consagrada; estoy sentada”) but she could easily be a man. She opens the narrative by describing her lifestyle, one of self-imposed isolation and total absence of curiosity for the world around her: “estoy consagrada a no ver” (19). She cannot and does not care to try and identify the cars and people below her; they are “indescifrables” (19).

Telling her audience very early on that she has certain “habits,” she explains why she becomes interested in the story of a young painter who falls to his death from the scaffold above her apartment: “Lo tuve cerca, le vi los ojos. Esa aparente nadería, para quien conozca mis hábitos, hace un mundo de diferencia” (19). Living very high up, she is used to absolute privacy and is startled when he stops his apparatus outside her window and looks in on her, seeing “something” in her hands that she does not have time to hide: “Así fue. Me vio y lo vi” (22). He gives her a ghost of a smile and then continues up to the apartment above. The invasion of her private space throws her into a crisis and she spends the next few days hiding from him in her bedroom and spying on him in turn as he moves...
up and down on his scaffold, always trying to peer into her apartment as he passes by. We know that the young man has seen something in her apartment that fascinates him and, in spite of the narrator’s measured tones, we sense that it is something “suspect,” something “wrong.” The narrator constantly hints at her own “perversion” without ever really telling us anything.

When the young painter falls to his death, our narrator decides to investigate the apartment above her. However, as she uncovers the murderer and puts herself into danger, she provides more and more indications that something horrific (we never know what) has been going on in that apartment for years, something she refused to acknowledge to herself in spite of hearing terrible sounds from above: “Pero no son solo golpes, ¿saben?: a veces son gemidos, llantos con sordina y trino. . . . ¿Han escuchado el ruido que emite una boca amordazada?” (30). She feels the need to explain herself to her audience: “Y lo que quiero explicarles es que los golpes secos no son de ayer” (30). Having gone up to the apartment to investigate, she flees in terror, telling her audience what she thinks they must have figured out for themselves: “como supongo que ya habrán comprendido. . . . Éramos de la misma especie” (29). Indeed, she tells us that she and the murderer are one of a kind. She concludes her story by explaining that the painter must have seen something in the apartment above, something that titillated him enough for him to want to return and look some more, much like he enjoyed peering into the narrator’s apartment, for, we assume, much the same reasons.

None of this is ever confirmed, however, and at the end of the story, the narrator indicates that her audience might be the police, but we do not know for certain. In fact, readers finish the story completely in the dark. We sense something evil, something “perverted” in all three of the characters who people this tale, including the painter, victim of murder, who, rather than rescue “esas bocas silenciadas” (30), returns to enjoy watching their suffering (we think). The story ends on the same reflective, detached tone with which it begins, and we are none the wiser. Did something horrible happen in that quiet and enteel condominium complex? Who is the narrator’s audience and are they complicit? And what about us, the readers? Are we titillated? Are we complicit?

Uncertainty, blindness or an inability to “see” or to act, the refusal to see or to act, cowardice and moral turpitude, the failure of heroism, entrapment — these are the themes that run through Becerra’s Muerte en el andamio and, to a
greater or lesser extent, through all of the stories in *San Juan Noir*. To carry on with Becerra’s imagery, the collection is itself a geographic and social scaffolding that allows us to peer into the lives of Puerto Ricans across social and political divides, perhaps, in the end, to finally see something clearly. In this sense, Akashic Books’ “gimmick,” publishing anthologies of noir fiction that showcase different cities of the world, becomes much more than simple literary tourism. We might posit, as a place to start, that the Akashic series, with *San Juan Noir* fully at the centre, provides us with a transglobal discourse of our times, a way to talk about what is happening to us and to those around us across class, racial, ethnic, national, religious, cultural, and political divides.

Literary critics often discuss the radical potential of noir fiction, including its first seemingly more conservative manifestations (Gorrara 213-4). While social, sexual, racial injustice and discrimination, class inequalities and marginalization, colonialism and government abuse are easily traced in every Akashic collection I have read so far (Toronto Noir, New Orleans Noir, and Mexico City Noir), their stories insist on showing and writing the multidimensional, contradictory, and often despairing lives of contemporary global citizens. In this sense, the “heroes” we can no longer find so easily in the stories are perhaps the writers, the editors, the translators, and the publishers who refuse to stop writing and publishing the lives of the other, in spite of the grime and the crud that threaten to overwhelm us all. As such, it is hugely significant that *San Juan Noir* was published in both Spanish and English: allowing us to see both the ugly history of Puerto Rican colonialism and linguistic politics as well as the seamless and thoughtful translation/bilingualism that might provide one way forward.

Most importantly, as we move through the San Juan stories, so lacking in hope or escape routes for their characters, a sense of human dignity slowly emerges. Another reviewer has put it this way: “Every tale glows in its own darkness, piercingly tugging at the remnants of human decency. We must do better, it screams” (Ashby). In Luis Negrón’s “Mataperros,” perhaps the second most horrifying tale in the collection, the first person narrator hands over Lázaro, his own *tecato* brother-in-law, his *cuñi*, to be killed by the narrator’s employer. The narrator feels bad about it all but never questions the order to get Lázaro high one more time and hand over the addict who has stiffed the boss one too many times: “Traté de decirle algo a Landi, pero me miró como mira...”
“Glowing in the darkness” of this tale is Charo, the narrator’s girlfriend and the murdered man’s sister. Charo is a transgender prostitute who is saving her money to travel to Ecuador for a sex change. In the midst of this terrible story, Charo shows loyalty and love to her brother and tries her best to keep him alive, while fully recognizing what he has become. She grieves for Lázaro and uses the money for her plane ticket to Ecuador to pay for his funeral, and then must go out and work even harder to save some more. When the boyfriend, feeling guilty, offers to pay for the ticket, Charo answers: “Mi chocha me la pago yo,” and refuses the offer. Although a completely marginalized character (even her boyfriend is ashamed of her large shoulders), Charo’s line speaks to a moment of pure human dignity. Although she is betrayed and lied to, trapped like everyone in patterns of relentless violence, Charo is honest, the character most able to love with true generosity, and the most willing to fight to be the person she wants to be on her own terms.

The last story in the collection, Charlie Vázquez’ “Death Angel of Santurce,” fittingly concludes our journey through San Juan to show us the tragic life of a young prostitute who dies of an overdose in a sleazy Santurce hotel. She is sad, she is hopeless, and a harsh narrative voice provides every crude detail of her pathetic existence and the sordid characters who surround her: “They grasp the heads of their dicks through their basketball shorts and the salsa pulse gets louder” (170). However, the narrative voice is not completely cruel. He allows us to see a young police officer’s moment of compassion for the young girl, as well as the concern of at least one friend. Most importantly, we see this young woman’s life, the son she cannot take care of, her love of old movies and the family she once had — her yearning to be living any life but this one: the “angelic and peaceful expression on her darkening face. . . . Her left arm . . . punctured with agony and guilt” (178). It is over: “there’s nothing to investigate. Overdose” (179). But we readers close the book, unable and unwilling to see all these characters, all these “people” we have met in the
pages of these stories, with the condescension and superiority that so often characterizes their narrative voices. We are not the San Juan partygoer from “Dentro y fuera” and we are not the condominium dweller from “Muerte en el andamio.” We are not the mocking narrator of “La espada de San Miguel” or the pitying voice of “La fama de Chin Fernández.” By the end of the book, we have actually seen a great deal, and we care.

Santos-Febres titles her introduction to the Spanish edition, “Crisis y crimen en el Caribe urbano” and tells us in her conclusion that Puerto Rico is a place where “los deseos y las bambres humanas componen un caleidoscopio de pasiones y violencia, iguales a las de tantos otros lugares de este planeta en crisis”(16) [human desires and hungers compose a kaleidoscope of passions and violence, just the same as in so many other locations on this planet in crisis]. I have translated this line because, for some reason, the English edition removes the “Crisis” from the title and ends the introduction with a call to visit Puerto Rico (?). If I had more time, I would question this, but the point I want to make is that Santos-Febres understands that these stories are distinctly Puerto Rican, just as the Toronto stories are distinctly Torontonian and the Mexico City stories distinctly Mexican. Nonetheless, the overall tone is one of “crisis” — “global crisis” — and this is what we see most clearly when we read these stories.

This understanding shines through the sleaze and the dirt, along with the “remnants of human decency” we discussed earlier (Ashby). In a New York Times Magazine interview, Toni Morrison tells Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah a story about a man named Big Lunch. As Morrison tells it, Big Lunch collected food from everyone and kept this food in his pockets where it spoiled, finally forming a stinking crust all over his body. One day, he was taken to the hospital where they washed the grime off his body. Big Lunch just became more ill until he died. As Morrison finishes the story, she tells the interviewer: “those people didn’t know that all that crust was what had been keeping him alive” (Kaadzi Ghansah). The stories in San Juan Noir are truly terrible, but they keep us alive and insist not only on the humanity of their characters but also of their readers. They are beautifully crafted and carefully translated, and very, very meaningful. They remind me yet again how much I love Puerto Rico and San Juan, from Río Piedras to Santurce through Condado to Old San Juan, and how much I admire its inhabitants, its history, and its culture. And yes, these stories most definitely make me yearn to return for a visit. Muchas gracias.
Works Cited


Catherine Den Tandt

This is a long overdue book-length study of a subject that has been greatly ignored: women and their role in the development and enhancement of Trinidadian folkloric and popular music. Although there have been many scholarly and academic analyses of calypso, many were locally published and had limited circulation even in Trinidad. Addressed from the perspective of gender studies, Munro’s text establishes that women have been instrumental in the development, maintenance, transmission, and innovation of musical practices, underscoring how female performers have altered gender roles and contributed to the advancement of women in the twin-island republic of Trinidad and Tobago. This work breaches gaps in knowledge about various music styles of the country and the region, discussing multiple genres and their impact on other subjects: culture, society, politics, literature, history, language, and gender, among other topics.

This book is an amazing achievement that builds on nearly fifteen years of research, fieldwork, traveling, learning about local arts, and even participation in many aspects of the cultural expressions (as both observer and active participant). It also required extensive research and knowledge about the scholarly and academic work that preceded the author’s work. The acknowledgments and Introduction read as a ‘who’s who’ in calypso connoisseurship and Caribbean scholarship and academia. Among her sources we find seminal authoritative voices of calypso—including prominent artistic and musical figures in calypso, soca, pan, and even parang—and others immersed in cultural traditions such as carnival mas, drama and performance, dance, and history. Also present are major scholars in Caribbean feminist movements and women’s issues. The references throughout the text suggest that the author’s expertise in this stellar publication is the result of substantial time and effort.

*What She Go Do* is divided into an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. It includes contains a glossary of terms for the benefit of readers who may be unfamiliar with some of the recurring local terms and language use. It presents numerous interviews with key figures who share a wealth of knowledge that has risked being ignored, lost, or forgotten. Several of the author’s anecdotal accounts are extremely entertaining and informative and
will allow those who have conducted similar research to identify with her experiences.

In the introduction, Munro situates the reader in the country’s present and in recent contexts in which women’s roles have become extremely prominent, transporting the reader back in time to provide a glimpse of their progression. The author begins with an account of her initial exposure to the art form of calypso and her first experiences in the study of Trinidadian music. The chapter includes an explanation of the society’s cultural and historical development from the period of its initial settlement and colonization to the postcolonial era, covering the social, cultural, and gender dynamics generated and sustained throughout. Munro highlights the role of the Trinidadian feminist movement, distinguishing it from other Western feminist movements and pinpoints various questions to be addressed in her discussion—what have been the roles women played in the creation and maintenance of various musical genres and performance traditions? Is the role of women linked more closely to maintaining traditions or to innovating popular music? What role has popular culture played in Caribbean feminism vis-à-vis gender-based oppression? Do musical genres and contexts change due to improvements in the status of women over the twentieth century? How has women’s shifting position in society generated change in the lives of others?

The introduction also covers perceptions of women’s sexuality and related historical perceptions about the region that linger to the present. Trinidad’s ethnic diversity and its emergence as a cosmopolitan Caribbean site are identified as factors that impacted relationships and attitudes, as the author comments on their complex intersections with musical art forms and various cultural expressions. Lastly, she comments on the role the internet played in her study, stating that it helped to keep her up-to-date on the salient issues and contributed to her understanding of recent social, cultural, and musical developments and women’s roles in them. While the author is not Trinidadian, the information she presents establishes her as a well-informed researcher and a person familiar with the island, its people, culture, and music.

The first chapter, “Woman is Boss: Music and Gender in Trinidad’s Cultural History,” focuses on the roles that women have played in Trinidad’s musical and cultural development from a Caribbean feminist perspective. It includes a detailed historical-cultural account spanning from the earliest periods through
the post-emancipation era and deals with women’s (both Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean) exposure to music during both the pre- and post-emancipation era as well as women’s roles as chantwells, dancers, masqueraders, and even stick fighters. The chapter presents specific biographical information (some of which is rare) and anecdotes about women who performed as singers, dancers, and even bandleaders in the nineteenth century. It includes information about calinda, women’s roles in singing these songs, and the genre’s eventual evolution into calypso.

Munro addresses the shift from a female-dominated music scene to a male-dominated one in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the struggles to maintain the musical and cultural traditions in the early twentieth century. She discusses the development of the calypso tent and women’s integration into this musical environment. With respect to the mid-twentieth century, the chapter covers the war and post-war eras and the postcolonial period, presenting examples of women and their contributions in calypso and in other venues of musical and cultural performance. The latter portion of the chapter addresses the last three decades of the century and the growing prominence of women in the musical and cultural realm.

The second chapter, “Women Rising: Women Find Their Place in Calypso,” examines the increased participation of women in the calypso art form and their contributions to the genre. She lists some of the women who ventured into the calypso tent and served as direct precursors for the women who would come to prominence as calypsonians and venture into recording. The author contrasts the development of party songs and the social commentary style of calypso, stating that women made vital contributions to both styles. She also addresses women’s participation in the writing and composing of calypso—a contested area in critiques and arguments concerning female calypsonians—including in the text first-hand accounts of some of the women performers she and others have interviewed.

The third chapter, “From Calypso Queen to Monarch,” shifts attention to specific women who entered the calypso art form, altered the dynamics of this music and its venues in the latter part of the twentieth century, and then became prominent role models for other women. The three main women interviewed for this chapter are Calypso Rose, Denyse Plummer, and Singing Sandra. The author shows how each had to overcome sexism, discrimination, criticism, and
other challenges in order to succeed and open doors in the music industry for themselves and the women who would follow them. She highlights their achievements, characteristics, and contributions and also shares stories of their pitfalls and triumphs. The chapter credits the male performers who supported these women and thereby contributed to the expansion of calypso in terms of gender equity and its evolution as an art.

“Carnival is Woman: Party Music and the Soca Diva,” the fourth chapter, is the book’s most innovative, as most works about the Trinidad calypso exclude discussion about soca, either due to perceptions of it as an entirely distinct musical genre—an ongoing and heated debate in both texts and song—or because they see it simply as senseless (worthless) party music and, as Munro indicates, belittle its contributions to the development of music in Trinidad. The author identifies detractors’ arguments against soca and presents counter-arguments against them. Munro begins by establishing correlations between soca and the ancient calinda, and its similarities with the up-tempo calypso that became increasingly popular in the last three decades of the previous century, covering what it added to the musical diversity of Trinidad and its appeal to both followers and (potential) musicians who were members of younger generations. In addition, the author addresses the development of soca in the context of changes in norms and attitudes concerning gender roles. She examines its economic incentives, its appeal across lines of gender, its performance contexts, and innovative changes in musical quality and instrumentation—as well as dancing styles, sensuality, international attention—as factors that expanded opportunities for female participation in the art form. Also discussed are women’s achievements in carnival mas processions, activities, events, fetes, and the recording industry, frequently disregarded but necessary topics in this discussion. Recognizing the variety of ways in which women are connected to the genre, she discusses the perspectives of performers, dancers, as well as fans. Munro comments on the division of soca into two main styles, groovy soca and power soca. Highlighting prominent figures in each style, she focuses on the top women: Fay-Ann Lyons, Destra Garcia, and Denise Belfon, relaying their successes, achievements, and contributions to music and gender equality. This chapter offers an extremely engaging discussion about this particular style/genre and its connections to calypso, one that defends its contributions as a derivation or style of this music.
Surprisingly, the last chapter, “Pan Rising: Women and the Steelband Movement,” is one of the shorter chapters, despite the fact that the author became an active participant in steelpan and even competed in Panorama. With this in mind, she could have provided more information about her first-hand experience and her knowledge as a musician. However, such information is limited, and the author does not overindulge in her substantial experience playing pan and participating in rehearsals and competitions. The chapter discusses women’s contributions to the development of the steelband movement over the course of its history, establishing how women have occupied and continue to play key roles as pannists, arrangers, and music educators. Munro points out the differences between pan and calypso, while also acknowledging the former’s role in enhancing calypso from the middle of the twentieth century onward. She mentions some of the women who have distinguished themselves and contributed to this art form, indicating their achievements. In particular, attention is given to Merle Albino de Coteau, Michelle Huggins-Watts, and Natasha Joseph. The chapter offers an exhaustive account of historical events that led to the development and rise of steelband. Munro discusses its importance in Trinidad and its diaspora, as well as globally.

The conclusion explores Trinidadians’ enthusiasm and passion for their music and related forms of cultural expressions. Recognizing music’s permeation of every aspect of life, the author emphasizes the pivotal role that it has played in the development of society and its roles in bringing about change in the contexts of gender norms and attitudes. She points to women’s roles in erasing boundaries between public and private spaces within the last few generations and to links between changing attitudes toward these indigenous forms of music and the emergence of nationalistic projects that enabled women to become key contributors to the expressive arts at the level of the island and the region. The author also addresses complications and setbacks that competitive practices of Carnival have played in accepting and fostering change. Finally, she argues that the expressive arts and culture have assisted in creating better social conditions for women, even while numerous challenges remain.

*What She Go Do: Women in Afro-Trinidadian Music* is an amazing accomplishment, one that manages to achieve its goals in a total of 182 pages. Previous studies of the history of calypso in Trinidad range from 200 to 500 pages. Despite this achievement, the book’s comprehensive treatment of its topic, and
its excellent quality, it is not the epitome of perfection. Munro focuses attention on some of the prominent female figures in the music and their gender struggles, and rightly so, but other renowned and lesser-known performers have made contributions and their stories also need telling. One example is the Barbadian Singing Francine, who developed her career in Trinidad, became a prominent figure in the region, rivaled some of the calypso queens, and faced challenges, criticism, and even rejection on the basis of gender as well as her nationality. Nevertheless, the book references her only a couple of times. In addition, Gene Miles, a light-skinned Trinidadian who was a minor but significant figure and activist that sporadically ventured onto the calypso scene in the early 1970s, is completely ignored in the discussion even though she endured scathing contempt due to her criticism of the government through activism and song. Her eventual dismissal from employment in the public service pushed her into a life of destitution until her death in the late 1970s.

Another aspect of the genre’s history that is only lightly addressed is the development of the all-female Calypso Divas Tent, which in the early 2000s provided a space for new young women to contribute to the genre. Singing Sonia, Karen Eccles, and Laura Pereira are among those with interesting stories and perspectives that are relevant to the topic of this study. The influence of women of Indo-Trinidadian or mixed descent could have also been discussed, especially since both Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian women are entering the calypso/soca circle. Drupatee Ramgooni’s entrance to the calypso tent and fete atmosphere, for instance, has impacted Afro-Trinidadian music and culture. Moreover, with the advent of soca, both musical traditions are increasingly fused, as the author aptly discusses in the latter portion of the fourth chapter.

The book’s title and its cover, which show Calypso Rose in the midst of performance, highlight the nature of its content, but also catch the attention of those familiar with calypso since the spelling of a verse from one of her more famous songs has been standardized. In reality, the words are, “Wha’ she goh do,” following the orthographic conventions that are used for the language of calypso lyrics. The fact that the book is also intended for an international audience may have been seen as reason for this change. In the end, the volume’s very significant contributions to knowledge make this peccadillo completely pardonable. The shift could have simply just been an editorial decision by the publishing house so…Wha’ we goh do?
Reviews

Hope Munro’s work is an engaging, insightful, and detailed study. As all other major studies in this field have been conducted by men, with this publication another barrier has been torn down. Students and readers of Caribbean Studies should read this book to become enlightened about the subject. The author needs to be commended for the production of this book in true Calypso manner...

So for her contribution to the study of this field,
To all types of readers Ah go make one appeal,
If yuh waan learn ‘bout Trini Woman calypso,
Read dis book by dis one Ms. Hope Munro,
She know wat she seh, dat dere in she book
Waan make yuh learn, Dance, Wine, an’ Jook
All de town o’ Trinbago, must thank Ms. Munro
Wid dis glorious book dat is…Kaiso, Kaiso KAISSO!...

Now we await the encore.

David Lizardi Sierra
University of Puerto Rico, Cayey Campus
List of Contributors

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