

“The Erotic as Power”: Sexual Agency and the Erotic in the Work of Luz Argentina Chiriboga and Mayra Santos Febres

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Baila la negra el son/ con el vientre desnudo/ y las nalgas redondas./ Baila la negra el son/ al ritmo de la plena,/ en medio de la noche ponceña.


From “Baila la negra el son” by Francisco Negrón Mattei (1896-1937)

“As a deep lode in our erotic lives and knowledge, how does our sexuality enrich us and empower our actions?”

From *Zami* by Audre Lorde

“Sobre estas pieles de nosotras se han escrito demasiadas cosas, demasiadas historias y afiliaciones, propiedades y fugas. Es hora de que tomemos estos signos en nuestras manos para reconfigurarlos de nuevas maneras, a ver lo que sale.”

From *Sobre piel y papel* by Mayra Santos-Febres

hen they were not rendered invisible and voiceless by those who shaped the “lettered city,” for much of the history of Latin American literature before the mid-twentieth century, Afro-descendant women were portrayed as hypersensual and hypersexual bodies devoid of the humanity sometimes ascribed to white women. The *negrista* movement, in particular, during the first three decades of the twentieth century was inspired by the folkloric and exotic elements of the heretofore marginalized black cultures of the Americas and focused largely on the rhythms of African-style drumming, dance, music, speech patterns, and most importantly the Black and Mulatto body. During the *negrista* movement, Afro-descendant women’s sexuality was brought to the forefront of Hispanic American poetry by male writers, the majority of them white or white-identified and bourgeois, such as Luis Palés Matos, Emilio Ballagas, Ramón Güirao, and

José Zacarías Tallet. With verses such as “Culipandeano la Reina avanza,/Y de su inmensa grupa resbalan/Meneos cachondos que el congo cuaja/En rios de azúcar y de melaza” (“Majestad negra” de Palés Matos), “Bailan las negras rumberas/ con candela en las caderas” (“Comparsa habanera” de Ballagas), “La negra Tomasa con lascivo gesto/ hurta la cadera, alza la cabeza;/[...]/ y procaz ofrece sus senos rotundos/ que oscilando de diestra a siniestra encandilan a Chepe Chacón” (“La rumba” de Tallet), *poesía negrista* gave Afro-descendant women space to writhe, wriggle, undulate, gyrate, and sashay through the voyeuristic imaginary of (mostly white) male writers and fetishized the *mulata* across the pages of Caribbean poetry, but also denied their subjectivity. The objectification of black and mulatto women is also present in texts by Afro-descendant male writers such as Candelario Obeso and Adalberto Ortiz. Although the authors were black and mulatto, the representation of Afro-descendant women remained within narrowly defined sexual parameters that placed male desire and sexual expression at the center. These male-defined limits of Afro-descendant women, were shaped not only by cultural conventions and prevailing postcolonial racial ideologies, but were reinforced by discourses in the disciplines of anthropology, medicine, biology, public health, and psychology that “had concluded with ever-increasing ‘scientific’ evidence, that the black female embodied notions of uncontrolled sexuality” (Hammonds, *Genealogy* 172).

Artist and critic Lorraine O’Grady referring to the status of black women as cultural producers states, “To name ourselves rather than be named, we must first see ourselves” (154). This statement by O’Grady is very much the *punto de partida*, the starting point for this discussion of the erotic and sexual subjectivity in Afra-Hispanic texts.¹ Black women throughout the Americas have been in an unstable and perilous space when taking up matters of sex and their own expression of sexuality, and more often than not the response has been silence. Evelyn Hammonds notes in “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Subjectivity” that “[t]he restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality have been emphasized by black feminist writers while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone under analyzed” (134). The publication of *Bajo la piel de los tambores* (1991) by Ecuadorian writer Luz Argentina Chiriboga marks a watershed moment in narrative fiction by black women in Spanish America not only because of its rhetorical devices that dismiss conventional punctuation and narrative structure, but also because it brings a decisive change in the representation of black female sexuality.² Instead of having their sexuality spoken for them—as has been the tradition in Latin American literature for most of the

¹ The use of the term “Afra-Hispanic” and “Afra-Latin American” is influenced by the usage of “Afra” in work by Miriam DeCosta-Willis in “Afra-Hispanic Writers and Feminist Discourse.”

² The novel was later re-edited and published in 1999 under the title of *Tambores bajo mi piel*, after the publication of the English translation of the book *Drums Under My Skin* (trans. by Mary A. Harris) in 1996.

twentieth century— Afro-Latin American women writers begin to break this (self) imposed silence and engaging with expressions of sex, sexuality, and the erotic in prose fiction. This act of auto-expression recasts the black female body and sexuality from object to subject, from silence to voice. Luz Argentina Chiriboga and the other black women writers who follow her, such as Puerto Rican writer Mayra Santos-Febres, overturn centuries of images of Afro-descendant women in Latin American literature.

Sexual subjectivity and agency expressed in Chiriboga’s first novel and Santos-Febres’s short story “Marina y su olor,” affirm the erotic and use it as a source of empowerment —to use Caribbean American poet Audre Lorde’s powerful declaration. In her landmark essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Lorde opens with an urgent call for women to tap the erotic as a source to effect personal and collective change. Lorde declares,

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. (53)

The erotic, a resource denied to women by the male-defined limits of sexuality and self-expression, when reclaimed by women reveals a powerful force of representation and subjectivity. By eschewing the association of the erotic with the pornographic, which “emphasizes [plasticized] sensation without feeling,” Lorde encourages women to seek the erotic in that interstitial space “between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” and “the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic or intellectual” (55, 56). The act of reclaiming the erotic also forges a bridge between the spiritual and the political and “[o]ur erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence . . . [and] in terms of their relative meaning within our lives” (57). Deepening awareness of the senses and connection with others, Lorde’s articulation of the erotic presents a political charge to affirm agency, self-definition, and self-assertion, and to shape one’s own image. In effect, as cultural producers the erotic becomes a vehicle for Afro-descendant women to “see” themselves and “to name [them]selves rather than be named.” (O’Grady 154). In prose fiction by Chiriboga and Santos-Febres, the erotic is indeed a source of creative and social power giving their protagonists the power to exercise sexual agency. The erotic becomes a site of resistance to reclaim aspects of black female sexuality that have been repressed, rejected, negated, and made invisible. It

becomes a source of power for characters of African descent to examine the connection between their ethnicity and gender and to claim sexual agency and subjectivity.

In Chirboga's *Bajo la piel de los tambores*, Rebeca González recalls her departure from the comfort of her modest home in Esmeraldas for boarding school in Quito where she is the only student of visible African descent. The narration is set in the 1960s during a period of military dictatorship, so while Rebeca comes of age in the pages of the novel, there is a parallel political subtext of the patriarchal order and the liberatory promise of revolution. The erotic enables the protagonist to cultivate a connection with her own physical development and her sexuality, as well as an awareness of the multiple significations associated with her *mulata* body. Rebeca deepens her understanding of issues of race, color, and class in Ecuador through a chance encounter with an Argentine stranger, interactions her bourgeois schoolmates, her sexual adventures, her communication with African ancestors, and her fascination with a black revolutionary nun. After confronting many challenges, including a violent marriage and the end of her innocence, eventually Rebeca is able to express herself as a political body to liberate others as well as herself by connecting the sense of "feeling" of the erotic with the political.

Rebeca's racially marked body in the *escuela de monjas* (convent school) disrupts the status quo and highlights her difference from her white classmates from elite highland families who joke about her *costeño* (coast) accent, call her *mona* (*montubia*, peasant girl), and question her intelligence and pedigree because of her African ancestry. A classmate crudely insults her with, "[S]o mulata igualada, eres una montubia, una miserable Uyanga, descendiente de africanos, y te la querés dar de gente" and one of the nuns at the school blatantly views "todas las cosas a través del equívoco lente de la raza." (56). These attitudes expressed at the school and the dominant culture of Ecuador impel Rebeca to suppress her blackness as much as possible in order to be accepted. Her yearning for acceptance is supported by her consciousness of the connection of color and class—a mulata with money could pass for white and a poor mulata is considered black. She declares, "Me gustaba estar con mis amigos porque con ellos tenía la seguridad de ser blanca" (87).

The purpose of her enrollment in boarding school in Quito is to provide the humble daughter of a Black farmer and light-skinned school teacher the academic and social formation that will give her access to middle-class respectability and protect her virginity. As the protagonist herself says, "una razón [por] mi internado fue alejarme de Milton Cevallos, hijo de nuestro vecino" (22). Rebeca's sexual development produces great anxiety in her mother, Nidia de González, who sees the white neighbor as a temptation and a lecherous drunken nightmare to avoid at all costs. Additionally, Nidia fears the consequences of Rebeca's unstable character: "Ella [Nidia] sabía que yo no era ni demasiado buena, ni demasiado mala; ni demasiado pulcra, ni demasiado vulgar; ni demasiado inteligente, ni demasiado tonta; ni demasiado blanca, ni demasiado negra. Justamente por eso le preocupaba mi carácter inestable, mi nadar entre dos aguas que la

llenaba de pavor” (16). To prevent Rebeca from falling victim to the stereotype of the always sexually ready black woman and uphold her daughter as an exception to this negative image of black female sexuality, the teenager is sent to Quito to learn how to be a proper *señorita*. To be considered a respectable young woman means possessing the right skin color, the right family lineage, and “correct” social, sexual, and religious morals and Rebeca fails on all accords because of her African heritage signifies filthiness, corruption, baseness, and immorality. One of the nuns at the school expresses disdain that Rebeca has not participated in catechism and her reaction presents the cultural subtext that views the Afro-descendant woman as inherently sinful. Interestingly, although Rebeca is sent to the boarding school to prevent her sexual ruin by following the good model of bourgeois society, she and her white-identified classmates, as well as some members of the religious order, disrupt this discourse by indulging in sexual exploration and desire.

At the very outset of the novel, looking back on her school experience, Rebeca reflects on how the students attended clandestine parties and used masks at the urging of Amelia Roca, a procuress disguised as a student, to hide their “innocent” identities and allow them to enter into *lo prohibido* (the forbidden):

Disfrutábamos la vida por partida doble: éramos estudiantes internas del colegio Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe y gozábamos las ilusiones que nos brindaba el antifaz. Con él nos atrevíamos a tocar los límites de lo prohibido, a bordear aventurillas ingenuas pero excitantes como incógnitas sentíamos la proximidad de la seducción. . . . (13)

The mask provides a way to release inhibitions in order to defy the limitations and gendered expectations placed upon them by the patriarchal family, the school, and the church. These seductive and sensual games with masks introduced by “La Roca” provide an opportunity for Rebeca to look, as well as be looked upon and the masked encounters also heighten the perception of the erotic sensibility and provide space for Rebeca to become attuned to her own energy and desire, to listen to the shades of her lover’s voice, feel the exchange of breath and heartbeats, smell the fragrance of delicate perfumes, and caress the sensation of skin and the texture of fabric. The institutions that form Rebeca’s quotidian world repress the sensual feelings of the erotic leading her to seek out pleasure and enact desire in secret.

At these masquerade parties with adult men, she becomes aware of the seductive power of her black female body to draw a reaction from the male gaze. Rebeca draws gratification at the sight of her own body as an object of enjoyment for herself and others, but also as a sexual subject. Before the mirror she observes:

[E]scogía un corte atrevido, ajustado con un drapeado en el busto para que los hombres exclamaran un acentuado ¡Ay! a mi paso. Fue cuando

advertí que el Todopoderoso me había dotado de la gracia del movimiento ondulante y por eso procuraba mantenerme en perpetua movilidad. Necesitaba mover los brazos, los pies, los labios, las curvas, el cabello: la inquietud era la razón de mi vida”. (14)

She is conscious of her attractiveness, her difference, her erotic power and how it can be used to give her the pleasure that she seeks. Nevertheless, within Rebeca there is a palatable triangular tension between the expectations of bourgeois society (and her parents), the assumption of hypersexuality made about her as a mulatta from Esmeraldas, and her own desires to express her sensuality. One of her suitors while trying to seduce her evokes several cultural stereotypes associated with Afro-descendant women – musicality, dance, and sin: “Le gusta bailar mucho a usted niña se la va a llevar el diablo por fiestera” (46). At times, Rebeca seems keenly aware of the assumptions and stereotypes made about her race and sexuality. For example, when Juan Lorenti, the wealthy father of her classmate Imelda, attempts to seduce her with declarations of, “Mi niña linda, eres una negra preciosa,” Rebeca reacts with “Degusté el elogio” (118). She rejects his advances and asserts her sexual agency; however, she does not have the same reaction with Fernando, another one of her suitors who appears to lay claim to her body for his pleasure. Rebeca comments, “[Fernando] Siempre vino seguro de sí mismo persuadido de que yo era supermercado donde podría adquirir todo lo que deseara” (91). Instead of resisting the sexual script laid out for Afro-descendant women in Western culture, she knowingly follows her desire to seek pleasure and adventure with him. Rebeca will later lose Fernando because his mother refuses to accept their relationship because she is black and *mona*, which are sometimes seen as homologous.

Rebeca experiences the “fullness and depth of feeling” motivated by her awakening sensuality and recognition of the erotic in her life. Moving the erotic beyond the sexual to the social, this knowledge leads Rebeca to go beyond the experience of the sexuality to question limits imposed by society and culture, particularly military dictatorship, political repression, classism and racism. Her sexual exploration and journey is intimately linked with her developing consciousness of the operation of ethnicity and class in Ecuadorian society, as well as the country’s political situation and the concept of national identity. In her development into adulthood, Rebeca becomes a literal warrior in the vanguard of revolutionary change. Her ability to exercise sexual agency, control her sexual choices and experience freedom within some restrictive social boundaries, transfers to her political action to support the revolutionary cause in support of the exploited and the workers and against the military government. Her initial attraction to the stranger, Julio Martínez –who is later revealed to be Che Guevara– draws her closer to her sexual desire, but also to political consciousness/awareness. In boarding school, her questioning of the social/sexual restrictions leads her to question the “truths” of life within the walls of the convent school. Rebeca recognizes that control is being exercised over the type of information

students receive, such as the “corrected” version of the nation’s history when pages are missing from the history texts: “[M]e preguntaba por qué ciertas páginas de la historia de la biblioteca el colegio no tenían numeración continua. Advertí, releendo mi texto traído de casa, que habían sido mutiladas” (22). In the backdrop of the city of Quito, army generals become figures of ultimate authority and power and the voices of dissent make their position known in graffiti, “Abajo los gorillas, Muera la Junta Militar” and youth shouting in the streets, “Abajo los ladrones, Mueran las botas asesinas” (64). When Rebeca leaves the school as a boarding student and stays at the Luz Divina mission with the black nun, Sor Inés del Rosario, danger and death become more apparent to Rebeca as her classmates remain oblivious in their own world.

She also questions the negative significations associated with the color black in everyday speech (*Pastoral Negra, lista negra, merienda de negros*) and further questions Ecuador’s everyday racism when she and her classmates meet Sor Inés del Rosario, a black nun with revolutionary ideas such as organizing workers and black women. Although she once expressed a desire for her classmates to see her as white – by suppressing her grandmother’s African last name and providing elaborate instructions to have her parents disguise their poverty by selling some two or three head of livestock to purchase a refrigerator and supply it with food, painting the house white and filling it with borrowed Bavarian china, silverware, linens, and cattle to impress her visiting school mates – she becomes more attuned to the racial divide. She remembers incidents with her classmates at school and in their outings where they would explicitly prefer white over black. On their way to visit Rebeca’s home town in Esmeraldas, a classmate points out that they were sold tickets to travel, but the blacks who stood in line before them were told that the tickets had been sold out. Rebeca begins to visualize and “feel” the landscape and as she opens herself to this erotic moment she also sense the history of slavery and racism in Ecuador: “Al pasar por el valle del Chota manos antiguas, esclavas en cañaverales e ingenios religiosos, revivieron en mis adentros sus tambores. Entre las nubes de polvo de aquel abandono me pareció leer: Apartheid” (94). She is brought in touch with this re-discovered knowledge when a fellow Afro-Esmeraldan traveler asks how did she get a ticket and Rebeca reflects, “Lo mire, al estar junto a él que era negro, yo volví a mi color natural, negra, Los compró la señorita blanca que va sentada adelante” (95). Upon arriving to Esmeraldas, Rebeca opens herself up to feel unease and discomfort between her experience in Quito and the casual, but insulting remarks of her friends from school about the speech patterns of the blacks, uncomfortable words like *mona* to describe people from the coast, and the often repeated saying “esto parece una merienda de negros,” to describe the perceived chaos of the town (96).

It is not until she becomes fully engaged with the sensory and sensual familiarity of returning to her “homeplace” and her family history does she begin to feel the drums of her ancestors beating under her skin. The smell of the sea, the regional food, the dampness of the earth, the sight of brown skin, the taste of sugar cane and coconut, the

sounds of the marimba, and the colors of the town lead Rebeca to assert, “Ya no me dolió aquella raíz que antes, equivocada, deseaba esconder. Me sentí parte de la abuela su consecuencia, oyendo sus tambores sonar bajo mi piel. Desde entonces empecé hablar con frecuencia de ella, y cada vez que lo hacía, encontraba más fuerza en sus recuerdos” (104). Engaging with bell hooks’ construction of the homeplace as a “site of resistance and liberation struggle,” critic Carol Beane observes in *Bajo la piel de los tambores* the significance of this return which allows her to unite her own identity with that of her *pueblo* in Esmeraldas: “This setting, this place exerts a more substantial authority over Rebeca than does boarding school. The homeplace elicits responses from her that oblige her to break the silence and cease obfuscating her identity” (168). This new vision that emerges from the breaking of silence and opening up to the parts of herself and her society occurs because of the awareness brought on by the erotic, the deep and intimate process of feeling.

While the novel does take on a taboo-breaking sexual openness as the protagonist uses the erotic as a source of power and to attain knowledge, there are some aspects to Rebeca’s character which run contrary to Lorde’s concept, particularly her marriage to Milton Cevallos. After her father’s death, Rebeca returns to Sikán to run the family’s farm with Milton’s assistance. She is attracted to his strength and sexual power, but she is repulsed by his brutish behavior, violence, jealousy, and alcoholism. Despite her mother’s opposition, she begins a relationship with him that she soon regrets. Rebeca unwillingly surrenders to Milton’s sexual advances, thus not heeding her own sense of the erotic, but rather follows a culturally sanctioned script that represses female desire. She feels remorse for not rejecting him, “lloré por mí, por mi liviandad y mi estupidez al entregarme a un blanco” (135). She pleads desperately for Milton to marry her, not because it is her ultimate wish, but rather because she feels pressure from social convention to marry the man who took her virginity. According to Miriam DeCosta-Willis, “She [Rebeca] seeks fulfillment and completion in the arms of a man because she has internalized the feminine values of her society” (“Poetics” 20).

With Milton, Rebeca is submissive and conforms to patriarchal expectations of femininity and sexuality. To escape Milton’s indifference and abuse, Rebeca transfers to him her desire for the Argentine stranger, Julio Martínez who represents idealized pure pleasure and demands nothing from her. Nevertheless, Milton Cevallos presents both an obstacle to her sexual agency and subjectivity, but also becomes a catalyst for her to reconnect with the feeling of the erotic she experienced as a student at the Colegio de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. When Milton hits and then rapes Rebeca for unconsciously pronouncing the name of Martínez, the true object of her desire, the scene is not portrayed through the lens of male desire. This scene contests the problematic depiction of rape that is represented in some Afro-Ecuadorian male-authored texts such as *Juyungo* by Adalberto Ortiz and *El último río* by Nelson Estupiñán Bass wherein the act of violation is only viewed from the perspective of male sexual gratification with the expectation that the female will acquiesce unto pleasure. Rebeca is

in tears and disassociates her husband’s violation from her body and instead she states, “Puse el pensamiento en el vacío, y comprendí que el vacío no era carencia, pues lo llené de repugnancias” (142). Her own desire cannot be fulfilled by Milton and his violence and it is at this point in the narration of *Tambores* when Rebeca begins to reconnect with her use of the erotic as power and she shifts from her own pleasure toward a collective political charge. When Milton is finally out of her life, Rebeca begins to “feel” again on her own terms and immerses herself in the sensation of life and living the erotic. She exchanges a carton of condoms for a copy of Freud’s *La sublimación de instintos* (Sublimation of Instinct) and dedicates herself to her work administering the fishing cooperative she established and organizing black female oyster divers with the encouragement of Sor Inés. Rebeca’s consciousness of the threat to freedom posed by the military junta increases and she becomes involved in the revolutionary movement by committing her life to the ideology of the opposition. By reconnecting with her own sense of self, Rebeca becomes empowered to participate in the resistance against the military: “[Y]o tenía boca para hablar, ojos para mirar, manos para la hacienda, pero no colaboraba en el rescate de la dignidad del país. Como con voz de otra persona, No hay que temer a la muerte si ella contribuye al nacimiento de la verdadera vida” (154). The erotic here, as identified by Lorde, gives Rebeca not only the permission to determine the route of her pleasure in the bedroom and in her sexual life, but also empowerment to effect political change. This power gained by self-connection, as opposed to living by “external directives,” is an act against oppression and motivates the female subject to be “less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being” (Lorde 58).

In her outstanding critical analysis of the novel, Miriam DeCosta-Willis observes,

Although Rebeca achieves a kind of sexual freedom, she does not attain that wider freedom of the mind and spirit that allow her to realize her full potential as a confident, secure, and independent woman, who calls into question her socially constructed identity as a middle-class, African-ancestored, Ecuadorian woman, but who eventually surrenders to a bourgeois femininity because she has internalized the socially-sanctioned values of a patriarchal society. [...] On one level, *Bajo la piel de los tambores* is a subversive work which attempts, through innovative rhetorical strategies and fictive devices, to undermine masculinist structures of representation, but, on another level, it presents female sexuality as essentially receptive and passive. (“Poetics” 24)

I agree with DeCosta-Willis that Rebeca is a complex, ambivalent character and Chiriboga does present Rebeca as an Afro-descendant follower of dominant notions of femininity. On the one hand Rebeca defies the limitations placed on her by institutions

and social conventions, but she also displays insecurity and subordination to cultural expectations. She is, as DeCosta-Willis notes, “acted upon as she acquiesces to the textual and sexual desires of others;” nevertheless, I contend that she also acts and the erotic gives her the power to act. The personage of Rebeca challenges stereotypes and representations by claiming sensuality, desire, and the language to express them. The erotic provides space for Rebeca to experience the positive, internal, and sensual feeling that encourages her to look at her life outside of institutional limits. Ultimately her trajectory takes her from object to subject. Unlike the image of the “hot,” sexually available mulatta in negrista poetry or the marginal black woman whose sexual subjectivity is absent or desire suppressed, Rebeca uses the erotic as a way to express herself and her subjectivity.

Similar to Luz Argentina Chirboga’s novel *Tambores bajo mi piel*, the protagonist in the multi-layered short story “Marina y su olor” by Mayra Santos-Febres recalls crucial moments in the life of the title character’s adolescence. The protagonist in “Marina y su olor,” like Rebeca González, moves toward visibility from invisibility and also engages with a political charge for self-definition and self-representation using the erotic as a source for empowerment. As Marina París grows into adulthood, she not only experiences physical and sensual changes but she also begins to understand the intersectionality of race/color, sexuality, and class in contemporary Puerto Rico. The young *mulata* protagonist engages with the erotic first through the sensory experience of growing up in and around the many sights, smells, and tastes of the kitchen. As she transitions from pre-pubescence into adolescence, Marina discovers that she possesses an extraordinary gift – her body emits aromas that she is eventually able to control with her emotions. The story opens with an image of a mature, forty-nine-year-old Marina who still possesses the magical powers she discovered in her youth:

Doña Marina París era una mujer repleta de encantos. A los cuarenta y nueve años expiraba todavía estos olores que cuando joven dejaba a los hombres del solar embelesados y buscando cómo poderle lamer las carnes a ver si sabían a lo que olían. Y todos los días olían a algo diferente. A veces, un delicado aromita a orégano brujo le salía de por las grietas de la entrepierna; otras, perfumaba el aire a caobo macho, a limoncillo de quemar golondrinos, pero la más de las veces olía a pura satisfacción. (Santos-Febres 43)

We learn through this well-crafted story that this satisfaction is the product of the title character’s ownership over her own body and control over her sexuality through the empowering force of the erotic. By being in touch with the internal – her desires and her sense of “feeling” – Marina resists imposed constraints, suppression, and oppression in order to assert her freedom and agency. In the process, “Marina y su olor” through the protagonist’s bodily experience as a poor, Afro-descendant, Puerto

Rican woman exposes the discord in the presumed racial harmony in the “la Gran Familia Puertorriqueña” (the Great Puerto Rican Family), the discursive metaphor of racial mixture and solidarity.³ Marina’s use of the erotic as power reveals a history that has worked to invisibilize and suppress the subjectivity of Afro-descendant women.

Marina grows up in Carolina around “El Pinchimoja,” a local restaurant operated by her father, Esteban París and his common-law wife, Edovina Vera. Marina takes over responsibility for the kitchen, supervising the preparation of the meals while her perpetually pregnant mother tends to the growing family. From the age of eight to thirteen, Marina begins to display her ability to give off the sweet, salty, and spicy smells of the kitchen from her body. She attracts the attention of the local men, drawn to her and “El Pinchimoja” because of her developing adolescent body and her ability to produce familiar aromas. Marina is unaware, however, that the fragrances released by her body arouse desires in men – including her own father:

Y ella, arropada como siempre en sus olores, ni se dio cuenta de que con ellos embrujaba a todo el que le pasaba cerca. Su sonrisa ampulosa, sus pasas recogidas en trenzas y pañuelos, sus pómulos altos y el olor del día le sacaban la alegría hasta el picador de caña mas decrepito, hasta al trabajador de caminos más chupado por el sol, hasta su padre, clarinetista frustrado, quien se levantaba de su sopor de alcohol y sueños e iba a parársele cerca de su Marina nada más para olerla pasar. (Santos-Febres 40)

The effect that Marina begins to have on men, particularly her father, causes great concern for Edovina who realizes that thirteen is a “dangerous age.” Without warning, Edovina arranges for Marina to leave the house and the restaurant and for her to begin to work for the Velázquez, a local white family. The Velazquez family includes the matriarch, doña Georgina, described as a “blanca beata ricachona” with a well-known taste for “yuca guisada con camarones” and her nineteen-year-old son Hipólito who also has a well-known penchant for dark-skinned girls, has set his desires on Marina. Carmen M. Rivera Villegas observes the great irony of the proud whiteness of the Velazquez family and their preference for African-derived gastronomy and African-descended bodies, a not-so-subtle commentary on the difficult acknowledgement of blackness that unravels the myth of whiteness and purity among the island’s upper middle class (“La celebración de la identidad”).

While Marina is in the Velázquez household, business at the Pinchimoja tapers off and she discovers the sensual and erotic capabilities of her body, “Fue en la casa de los Velázquez donde Marina se percató de su habilidad podigiosa para albergar olores en

³ See “La Gran Familia Puertorriqueña Ej Prieta De Verdad” by Arlene Torres.

su carne” (Santos-Febres 45). She is not only able to produce smells of the daily menu from her body, but she learns to channel scents from her past, the fragrance of emotions like solitude, frustration and sadness, and she garners the ability to collect the scents of others, such as the smells of her patrons, their neighbors, and their servants. Interestingly, Marina becomes empowered in a space that is sometimes seen as disempowering for an individual black woman working for a white family. Rivera Villegas observes, “La cocina se convierte para Marina en el lugar de aprendizaje y liberación. Fue ahí donde aprendió las artes para preparar un plato exquisito y donde se dio cuenta de que el arma que poseía sólo le pertenecía a su propia voluntad” and at the end of the story she returns home to El Pinchimoja to revive the business that will provide her with economic liberation and cultural affirmation (“La celebración de la identidad”). In other words, the kitchen becomes a place not of subordination and repression, but a space for Marina to affirm her freedom, her blackness and to examine her creative, economic, erotic, and sensual power.

It is also in the Velázquez household that she learns to defend her body. Marina’s presence in the Velazquez household is perceived by Hipólito as an opportunity to seduce another mulatta without leaving home for his nightly search to look for “mulattitas para hacerles ‘el daño’” and he relentlessly pursues her (Santos-Febres 47). He looks at Marina as his next conquest, but she rejects his advances, “lo veía tan feo, tan débil y apendeja’o que de sólo imaginarse que Hipólito le ponía un dedo encima, su carne empezaba a oler a pescado podrido y ella misma se daba náuseas” (Santos-Febres 47). When the conventions of tradition such as the *derecho de pernada* and the history of class and racial difference, dictate that she should submit to Hipólito’s advances, she does not. For Marina to reject Hipólito, who is of a higher class status and a presumably superior racial category, is really quite an important act of defiance. She feels in control of her body and makes her own erotic choices, thus affirming her subjectivity.

In the course of a year and a half of living with the Velázquez family, Marina meets and falls in love with Eladio Salamán. Thoughts of Eladio create a flood of emotions in Marina and they also cause a mixture of fragrances to come out of her body and into her cooking. Her dish of shrimp and yucca comes out smelling like pork chops and her potato pastelón comes out smelling like Hipólito’s underwear causing everyone to get sick. When Marina sees Hipólito again, she hurries back to the Velázquez home to prepare a meal “que fue la más sabrosa que se comió en el comedor de los Velásquez en toda la historia del pueblo porque olía a amor y al cuerpo dulce de Eladio Salamán” (Santos-Febres 48).

However, when a jealous Hipólito witnesses Marina walking hand-in-hand with Eladio, her happiness with her new love is abruptly halted. Hipólito speaks to his mother about Marina. We are not privileged to the comments that he makes to Doña Georgina, but we can be certain that by her reaction that Hipólito’s words were not positive. Doña Georgina launches into a tirade with words that are sated with the

matrix of race, sex, and power. Doña Georgina insults Marina calling her, “¡Mala mujer, indecente, negra apestosa, apestosa!” (Santos-Febres 48). These affronts are loaded with several layers of cultural significations connected with the black and white women’s bodies. The use of the phrase “mala mujer, indecente” associated with the black body immediately evokes its sometimes invisible opposite, “buena mujer, decente.” It is the latter that establishes notions of not only the culturally appropriate behavior expected of the idealized Puerto Rican femininity, but also dictates who is permitted to express these notions and who is allowed to police them and how. With the two women, one white and the other Afro-descendant, present in this scene, Doña Georgina views herself as the “buena mujer, decente” but also feels she has a public reputation to protect as an upholder of white, middle-class values. Marina’s public affection and display of sexuality towards the dark-skinned Eladio “reflects” poorly on Doña Georgina’s desire to maintain a certain public image of control of her household. As the opposite of Doña Georgina’s whiteness, class position, repressed sexuality, and proximity to the idealized femininity, Marina is the “mala mujer, indecente” – black, poor, and “sexual.” When Doña Georgina links “negra apestosa” she is evoking a long held and widely circulated stereotype that the black body “stinks” – it is defective, infirm, diseased, undesirable. She repeats “apestosa” to emphasize her displeasure, which also underscores the historical tension between women of the Creole elite and the black and mulatto women over power, place, and privilege.

Doña Georgina keeps a vigilant eye on Marina, restricting her exit from the house and her communication with Eladio. As a woman in erotic self-connection with her body and her feelings, Marina’s cooking becomes insipid because of her depressed emotional state, which prompts even more insults from her *patrona*. Marina’s desire for Eladio grows and she summons him to the Velazquez house with her fragrance, but their encounter is cut short by Hipólito’s insults. In an effort to blackmail Marina, Hipólito proposes to Marina that he will not tell his mother about Eladio’s unapproved visit if she will let him suck her breasts. For Marina, this perverse request is the last straw. She becomes uncontrollably angry and the rancor in her body begins to produce rancid smells: “Por todos los poros se le salió un olor herrumbroso mezclado con peste a aceite quemado y ácido de limpiar turbinas. Era tan intenso el olor que Hipólito Velásquez tuvo que agarrarse del sillón . . . agobiado por un mareo” (Santos-Febres 50). She is in deep connection with the liberatory erotic power and knowledge that “becomes a lens through which [she] scrutinize[s] all aspects of [her] existence” and will not let anyone or any external force to control or suppress her life force (Lorde 57). With “una sonrisa victoriosa,” Marina continues to take her revenge by filling the house with the bitter smells of “melancholia desesperada” until the entire house “despedía aromas inconexos, desligados, lo que obligó a que nadie en el pueblo quisiera visitar a los Velásquez nunca más” (Santos-Febres 50). The odors that Marina produces simultaneously appropriates and subverts a cluster of stereotypes that associate blackness, femaleness, and lower classes with foul odors, moral contamination, and

“animalness.” Alan West-Durán notes in his analysis of race and identity in Puerto Rico that in the story:

Marina is able to take that ‘animalness’ and make it a weapon of self-defense. Odor is linked to notions of power as when expressed in phrases like “the lower classes don’t wash, the smell,” or Thomas Jefferson’s remark that ‘blacks have a strong, disagreeable odor,’ or male jokes about women’s genitalia. All these notions of odor undergird sexism, racism, and classism. (65)

The protagonist decides to bundle these assumptions and stereotypes and force the Velázquez family to confront them directly as her “parting shot.” As Marina prepares to rejoin the life that she desires – her love of Eladio and El Pinchimoja restaurant – she makes sure she has the last word before leaving the Velázquez Family, “se le escaparon unas palabras hediondas que a ella misma la sorprendieron. Bajando las escaleras del balcón, se oyó decir con resolución: --¡Para que ahora digan que los negros apestan!” (Santos-Febres 50). Marina has the last word on her determining not only her pleasure, but also her life by claiming her sexual agency, overturning stereotypes, and defining her subjectivity in a society that seeks to repress her liberation because of her color, class, and sex.

This short story by Santos-Febres counters the problematic representations of black female sexuality found in *negrismo*, which features the unbridled hypersexuality of the woman of African descent. The portrayal of the erotic (over the exotic) goes beyond the presentation of remedial representations to make the Afro-Latina body appear “acceptable” by embracing the invisible norm of whiteness. By affirming the sensual and the erotic as a source of power and knowledge, the character Marina challenges racism and sexism and presents a redemptive quality that subverts the notion of the sexually dangerous, pathological, and predatory Afro-descendant woman. Marina throughout the story, unlike Rebeca in *Tambores*, consistently refuses to be defined by the dominant “European-American male tradition” as identified by Lorde and her connection to the erotic within her life such as the colors of food she prepares, the taste of the different dishes and the smells of the kitchen give her the power and knowledge to affirm her femaleness, her blackness, and her class position in the “face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society” (Lorde 59). Marina’s story is one of empowerment and control over one’s own body and destiny.

From Valverde’s *Cecilia Valdés* to Palés Matos’s “Majestad negra,” Latin American literature is replete with the (hyper)sexualized representations of Afro-descendant women and similar tropes are seen in the “Sapphire” and “Jezebel” characters in US American literature that highlight the uncontrollable and pathological sexual appetite and sexual availability of the woman of African descent (especially the mulatta). Female sexuality and Black female sexuality in particular are topics that

appears in the work by Afro-Latin American authors and transcends the need to present “corrective” imagery to counter the representations of black female sexuality (especially by male writers of the *negrista* tradition) that portrays a sexuality of Otherness that is abnormal and abhorrent. Rather than falling to silence, which had been the tendency in early writing by Afro-descendant women in the Americas, contemporary writers disrupt the silences of Black women’s literary expression of the erotic and break taboos by presenting themes like birth control, marital rape, sexual harassment, incest, “forbidden” sex (relations with a priest, lesbian desire), and female pleasure. The texts by Luz Argentina Chiriboga and Mayra Santos Febres express the aspects of pleasure and exploration, but in texts by both writers sexual agency is a matter of central importance as their characters express sexual subjectivity through Audre Lorde’s concept of the erotic. The erotic and the sensual are sources of knowledge as well as power and there is a refusal to be reduced to an object of sexual pleasure, but to see oneself as a feeling, sensual subject. Quoting Toni Morrison, Lorraine O’Grady explains the shift in African American literature when in the 1970s Black women writers began to turn away from the patterns of male writers of “explaining *it* to *them*,” and towards what O’Grady describes as “showing how it feels to *us*” (O’Grady 156). This is precisely what the erotic does in Afro-descendant women’s texts by giving space to “name ourselves rather than be named” by making visible and foregrounding black women as sexual subjects and agents, not fetishized and distorted objects of desire and pleasure for others under a lens of racism and patriarchy. Although it is difficult to make the case for Afro-Latin American women writers because of the complexity of categorizing an identifiable local market of black readership, it may be argued, however that Black women writers are simultaneously writing for themselves and against a master narrative by using the erotic as source of power for their characters.

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