

Love and Perversion: Images of Black Womanhood in Twentieth-Century Honduran *Poesía Negra*

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Es un aporte, que lleva el sentimiento de un pedazo de nuestro pueblo, que vive arrullado por el mar, trabajando duramente en su parcela humilde, creando el nuevo concepto de la raza, y cultivando sus nobles sentimientos de hondureñidad a través de su piel fina, oscura, adolorida y triste.

Claudio Barrera (Prologue 8)

Poesía negra is a genre of poetry that developed in various Latin American nations and reached its apogee in the 1930s (Young 137).¹ Although it is widely recognized that *poesía negra* has contributed to the development of Caribbean literature, there are few investigations that acknowledge that Central America witnessed its own encounter with the genre (Morales 19-20). In Honduras, poet and journalist Claudio Barrera (*nom de plume* for Vicente Alemán) published an anthology of poetry and artwork titled *Poesía negra en Honduras* (1959); created by various Ladino poets, these poems and images were selected by Barrera to pay homage to the Afro-descendants that have made Honduras their home while creating a space for them within the panorama of Honduran national identity.² As Barrera states in the prologue, he wants for his anthology to act as a contribution to support Afro-Hondurans in their creation of a “nuevo concepto de la raza” (8). When considering this space that the Ladino poets and artists of *Poesía negra en Honduras* have carved out for Afro-Hondurans, we see that the Afro-Honduran woman is touted as an object of love and desire, while her image plays out as a series of tropes such as the

¹ In this investigation I use the term *poesía negra* because that is the term used in the anthology I analyze. However, it is also referred to as *poesía negrista*, *afroantillana*, or *negroide* (Young 137).

² The definition of ladinization and Ladino is complex, for some define these terms as something similar to *mestizaje* implying that they refer to a subject from a mixed-blood, indigenous, and European background. However, to be Ladino does not necessarily imply being of a mixed heritage. A Ladino can refer to somebody from a mixed background, but it can also refer to an indigenous person who is “decultured” and denies a native background by attaching him or herself to Hispanic culture (Fiehrer 43). Although Ladino implies both a racial and cultural identity, for the purpose of this paper I use it to refer to a racial identity. Although *Ladino* and *white* are not necessarily comparable in terms of race, they are comparable in terms of power and privilege in their respective countries.

sexually perverse black Jezebel and the tragic mulatta. In this paper, I propose that although these works of Honduran *poesía negra* imply a desire to praise and adore Afro-descendant women, in many cases they tend to limit the image of black women to stereotyped roles that construct her as sexually problematic. As Barrera states in the prologue, the original intent of the collection was to insert Afro-Hondurans into the canon of literary production and national identity; however, the limited parameters imposed upon the behavior of black women as seen in the verbal and artistic renderings of blackness of these works shut the door on a more complex construction of womanhood and race (5-8).

Performing the Jezebel

Film critic Laura Mulvey speaks of voyeuristic pleasure and the “male gaze,” of which females are viewed as the object; involved in this pleasure is the act of a male “looking” at the human form (female) as an object (17). She explains that “it [the instinct to observe] can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other” (17). While Mulvey specifically focuses upon film as being an outlet for voyeuristic fantasy, she also discusses Freud’s definition of scopophilia as the basic human desire to take in “other people as objects” (16). *Scopophilia*, defined as the male erotic pleasure of observing the female form, is commonly expressed in Honduran *poesía negra*, often paired with the term *sandunguería*, which specifically refers to the manner in which people—in this case the women of the poetry—moves their bodies. When we consider the power of the voyeuristic gaze to dominate and consume the body of the Other, we not only question how Ladino males interpret and see Afro-Honduran women, who they perceive to be so flagrantly scorning the rules of proper female behavior, but also question where the dominant Ladino male population would place the “rebellious” curves of Afro-Honduran women that fall victim to their gaze.³

Freud’s concept of scopophilia is not the only way in which we can think of a metaphorical consumption of otherness. bell hooks alludes to the aspect of cannibalism in her essay “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” accentuating that the act of “eating” another culture comes in many forms and is often manifested by sexual contact with the Other or by the cultural appropriation of the Other’s traditions (26). Throughout Honduran history, we see that Ladinos have desired to possess and control the behavior of Afro-Hondurans by dominating the most vulnerable part of the population: the body of the black female. bell hooks concurs with that idea in her essay “Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood,” in which she verifies that “A devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years” (53). Gerda Lerner confirms that this devaluation of women is primarily found in forced sexual contact and asserts that “The practice of raping the

³ In her essay “Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?” bell hooks proposes that black skin alone implies sexual transgression (160). She highlights that despite the performer Madonna’s open sexuality, as a white woman she is looked at as more of a good girl led astray via circumstance; by contrast, regardless of how they dress, black female artists are rarely seen as innocent but always perceived as being sexually “open.” The black woman feels that she does not have “the ‘freedom’ to act in rebellious ways in regards to sexuality without being punished” (160).

women of a defeated enemy is world-wide and is found in every culture” (172). The same paradigms of submission were set firmly in place in Latin America; throughout the conquest and colonization of the indigenous inhabitants, sexual penetration was a common tool of terror and domination (Paz 68-78). But the act of forced penetration does not always need to be present in order to enforce control; often it is merely the gaze that creates a discourse that controls the body of the subjugated woman. In such a manner, the discourse created about Afro-descendant women by Ladino men controls these women who become object of the gaze of their poetry. Ladino men have greater access to power, which allows them to disseminate a particular discourse to other Ladino Hondurans that privileges the Ladino, male version of the construction of blackness, femininity, and sexuality. The Ladino desires to consume blackness and eventually spitt it back out, newly molded by his own interpretation of race and nationality. This act of production is commonly done by portraying Afro-Honduran as a Jezebel, a stereotype or historically constructed category, “which branded Black women as sexually promiscuous and immoral, [and] was used to rationalize . . . sexual atrocities” (West 294).

Before discussing the verbal images painted by the words of poets included in Barrera’s anthology, I wish to first address what stands out above all in the text: the artwork.⁴ It was not uncommon for many works of the Caribbean *poesía negra* to contain artistic renditions of Afro-descendants performing an activity related to the overarching themes of the poetry. Barrera’s anthology is no different. For example, found between pages 56 and 57, one of the paintings, depicting the figure of an Afro-Honduran female accentuates stereotypical African features and the very obvious flaunting of sexuality. The woman has exaggerated lips, pronounced buttocks, large breasts, and erect nipples that are visible through a tight shirt. The mere fact that the woman’s body is extremely distorted gives the impression that she is somehow abnormal and outside the realm of humanity as defined by the normative Ladino group. Her pronounced buttocks and nipples construct a visual narrative of desire and, above all, connote sexual availability. The scene surrounding the woman—a deserted beach scattered with palm trees—creates nostalgia for years gone by, for it is a primitive scene in which no signs of modernity are present. Blackness is seen as something reminiscent of a time frozen in the past, when the Afro-Honduran woman was perceived to be sexually available and willing to be taken by the Ladino male. Patricia Hill Collins traces perceptions of black female sexuality (as seen by whites), and, paraphrasing Foucault, notes that “Biological notions of race and gender prevalent in the early nineteenth century which fostered the animalistic icon of Black female sexuality were joined by the appearance of a racist biology incorporating the concept of degeneracy” (“Pornography” 392). The combined “degeneracy” of the black woman’s behavior and her supposedly “naturally” sexual body justified the white men using her (whether visually or physically) for their personal pleasure. The figure of the black woman in the painting, with her sexual openness, is ready for visual consumption by the portrait’s viewers and is reduced to a sum of her sexual parts (breasts, lips, legs, and buttocks) which transforms her into a “fragmented commodity” (Omolade 7) and a wanton Jezebel (Hill Collins, *Black* 56). As for fitting into Honduran national identity, this Afro-Honduran woman is literally painted into the

⁴ Little is known about the origin of the artwork in *Poesía negra en Honduras*, Barrera does not credit the artist. Some of the artwork carries the signature of Dante Lazzaroni, a Honduran artist of Italian descent.

peripheral areas of hegemonic society as a resident of the distant coast. Due to the sexual nature of the portrait, the black woman is construed as an object of pleasure (visual and/or physical) but as neither a participant nor actor in the nation. She exists solely as the target of a leering “admiration,” located on the isolated coasts of eastern Honduras, a sort of folkloric figure that plays no part in modernity.

Due to her exaggerated sexuality, the black woman of the portrait depicts a threat of unbridled passion aimed at enticing otherwise upstanding Ladino men to sexually consume her. This artwork, although not connected with any poem in particular, can serve as a visual harbinger that connects the sexually charged themes highlighted in several works of the anthology. Much of the poetry displays an almost overwhelming fear/desire for a potential consumption in which the black woman’s sexuality is so pervasive that the Ladino male voyeur (seen as the poetic voice) cannot help himself from being consumed by her *sandunguería* or from consuming the woman through sexual interaction. This is not to say that the black female subjects in the following verses are “asking” for a sexual encounter with their male voyeurs, but rather the poets seem to express an implicit “she asked for it” attitude through their expressed desire to consume her Otherness. In her scholarship on gender studies, Lisa M. Anderson concurs that in the Americas, males of European heritage felt a right to the black women who they observed and that “The myth of black female sexuality provided an opportunity for white males to own women who would then be available to them sexually” (87). She verifies that this image of the libertine Afro-descendant woman has not diminished over the centuries, but rather it is manifested in various tropes of blackness such as the Jezebel figure (87-88). This observation is relevant in the poem “Canto a la rumbera porteña” by Honduran poet Daniel Laínez.⁵ The premise of this poem is representative of much of the Honduran *poesía negra*; the Ladino male is the voyeur who secretly gazes upon the body of the black female and subsequently cannot quell his lust for/or fascination with her:

Serpentina,
serpenteante,
negra carne,
loco son,
al retorcerte jadeante
pienso en un mal torturante
que olvidó la inquisición...

.....

Al volar tus leves faldas,
mis instintos definidos
gimen y vagan perdidos
en el va-i-ven de tus nalgas. (18)

The *sandunguería* element so integral to *poesía negra* is prominent in “Canto a la rumbera porteña,” but as detailed in the previous paragraphs, the construction of the black female figure is multifaceted. The black temptress is evidenced as the poetic voice of the poem

⁵ As in much of the *poesía negra* of the Caribbean, the playing of rumba music is the impetus for the movement of the black women that the Ladino observer witnesses (Cartey 79).

attempts to depict himself as victimized by the sensuality of this particular woman. He falls prey to her when her skirt flies up, and he is exposed to her swaying buttocks. His helplessness before her sexuality is apparent in his admission that his once defined instincts “vagan perdidos.” Clearly, we can see that the male poetic voice in the poem claims no responsibility for his state of arousal before this woman. It is the Jezebel attributes of the Afro-descendant woman that force him to go countercurrent to the traditional Amerindian-European relationship established as he desires to be with and figuratively consume this woman of African heritage.

Jesús Cornelio Rojas writes an even more revealing poem on white shame and the desire to consume Otherness. In his poem, “Loco son,” he describes his contact with a black woman while dancing. He writes:

quiero que se lleve el viento
de tu raudo movimiento
la negra pena que siento
clavada en el corazón.

.....

Que mi corazón se empache,
fiera Venus de Azabache
con tu continuo bailar.
El ron de tu danza loca
negra de bembuda boca,
pueden hacerme olvidar. (43-44)

Again, we find a situation in which the Ladino observing a black woman dancing elaborates upon his feelings on being witness to this sight. In the beginning, he feels a “negra pena” (“black shame”) for even daring to watch her sensual dance, but feels helpless to avert his gaze because he is entranced by her sexuality.⁶ He continues with his description:

como el de tu danza, suba,
africana flor del mal,
hasta mi alma ensombrecida
por una dicha perdida.
Y ponle tú, de escalera,
tu sudorosa cadera
salvaje negra fatal.

.....

Y que se enreden mis males
en las raudas espirales
de tu danza de ciclón. (44-45)

Due to what the poetic voice perceives to be her sexually aggressive nature, his heart is forced to figuratively overfeed itself (“se empache”) on the sight of this black woman, yet despite *his* inability to stop staring, he assigns negative attributes to this woman, with phrases such as “africana flor del mal” and “salvaje negra fatal.”

⁶ It should be noted that “negra pena” can also be translated as “black sorrow.”

In yet another poem of the anthology, we find a continuation of the black Jezebel trope. In his poem "Romance de la danza negra," David Moya Posas writes from the point of view of the Ladino spectator. In this work, the poetic voice narrates a scene in which he stumbles upon a group of Afro-Honduran workers participating in a party. Unaware that they are being observed, the workers "hacen círculos al baile," and a black woman begins to seductively dance (61). The narrator of the poem feels seduced by the woman's body and cannot avert his eyes. He explains that:

Entre el vestido que tiembla
de lentejuelas y encajes,
asoman sus dos columnas
los muslos de chocolate. (61)

In "Loco son," "Romance de la danza negra," and "Canto a la rumbera porteña," the interpretation of the women's sexuality share many parallels. As already stated, they fall into the constructed identity of the Jezebel, that is, the wanton temptress, but it is the explicit association with the color of their skin that leads the male onlookers to construe their blackness as akin to libertine behavior. Interspersed with the allusions to sexuality, the poets accentuate the women's skin color to a high degree, making it impossible for us to forget that these are *sexual* women of color who they are describing. Yet, even more revealing is that the poets appear not to be able to separate blackness and sexual behavior; the two concepts are intrinsically intertwined. In "Canto a la rumbera porteña," Laínez refers to the observed women as "negra carne" and "Ardiente negra rumbera" (19), while in "Loco son," Cornelio Rojas refers to the woman as a "fiera Venus de Azabache," a "raudo huracán de carbón" (44), and also states that her hips are the color of "charol" (43), or patent leather. Finally, in "Romance de la danza negra," Moya Posas directly associates the woman's thighs, a highly sexualized part of the female body, with chocolate, a reference that draws the reader's attention to the fact that the color of her skin is dark brown.

In Laínez's poem, both references to the woman are direct parallels between the color of her skin and her sexuality. While the word "negra" quite simply translates into "black," the meaning of the word "carne" is at best ambiguous, for the poet could be talking about her black flesh and at the same time he could be characterizing her as "black meat." The second reference to her blackness can be more easily interpreted as an ardent (in the sense of passionate) black rumba dancer. We see by associating the black woman with objects such as charcoal that this leads to an effect that bell hooks categorizes as the "devaluation" of black womanhood, where there is an "effort on the part of whites to sabotage mounting black female self-confidence" ("Continued Devaluation" 59). When reduced to an inhuman and even edible object such as meat or chocolate, or when compartmentalized as a particular body part (especially one that is sexually charged such as hips or thighs) instead of seen as a whole, the woman of the poem loses her humanity through the commodification of her body parts. Furthermore, by being reduced to flesh/meat or chocolate, she is an object that is only fit for the consumption of the male onlooker. After dehumanizing her, this "chocolate" or "carne" devolves into nothing more than a sexual object, for the poetic voices appear to assume that when a black woman shows off her body by dancing, she then demonstrates to him that she is passionately burning for him to touch or consume her. In this example, we witness how the sexuality and color of the Afro-

descendant woman turns into metaphor. bell hooks uses several such examples of race-based metaphor when discussing how African American women are demeaned by white men; in her essay "Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood," she mentions the race-based metaphor "hot chocolate"; like "hot chocolate," the Afro-Honduran woman is reduced to inanimate objects that deny the humanity of the female subject (59).⁷ In these poems, the black woman can be a dark "huracán" or "Azabache," but she cannot be human, for the color of her skin will not permit her to be viewed on equal terms with her Ladino onlooker. Adding to the further devaluation of her humanity is that these metaphors are linked with images of nature. Connecting the woman with nature further complicates her for she is less than human if she is "Azabache" or a "huracán."

Having observed how the aforementioned descriptions and tropes are used to dehumanize Afro-Honduran women in examples of *poesía negra*, we are led to question the way in which blackness and femininity are positioned within the context of Honduran national identity. It becomes obvious that the exclusion from dominant society is used as a tool to prevent blacks from even being constructed as human, much less legitimate members of the nation. Speaking of national identity, race, and miscegenation, bell hooks postulates that "American women have been socialized, even brainwashed to accept a version of American history in the form of white supremacy and sexual imperialism in the form of patriarchy" ("Racism and Feminism" 120). Although she speaks about the black experience in the United States, her words have parallels with Honduras. bell hooks challenges the system in which both racism and national identity/patriotism are taught, which therefore makes it difficult to disentangle the two discourses. In other words, she questions how one can embrace national identity if one does not embrace the racism that remains buried deep within the psyche of a nation and manifests itself in daily discourse. As seen in the context of Honduras, from an early age students have been taught not only that the indigenous Lencan chief Lempira is a national Honduran hero, but they were also taught about the Spanish contribution to Honduran culture (Barahona 278). Only recently have Hondurans of all races been taught about African cultural contributions on a somewhat limited basis, though the reality is that there have been very few efforts to write blacks into Honduran national identity (Anderson 25). Taking bell hooks's thoughts into consideration, I would confirm that a similar dialogue appears in the abovementioned Honduran poetry. As stated, Barrera claims that the determinant for including these particular works in the anthology is that they assist in writing Afro-Hondurans into national identity. What I wish to highlight is that the particular images of Afro-descendant women that appear in the national imaginary are what Cheryl Townsend Gilkes calls, "stereotypes . . . much larger than reality" (171). As long as the black woman conforms to one of the particular stereotypes, she can appear as a liminal figure in Honduran national identity. The moment she oversteps this boundary and desires to be something different, her image disappears from the national imaginary. This definition of black womanhood is seen in almost all of the examples of *poesía negra* chosen by Barrera in which black women are present; there are very few examples of poetry that go beyond the sexuality of the Afro-Honduran woman.

⁷ The term "hot chocolate" was originally used in Lorraine Hansberry's work *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1969).

The Image of the Mulatta

In many examples of literary production the mulatta woman receives a somewhat different treatment and approach than the woman who is identified as exclusively black. As I have underscored, in Barrera's anthology the reoccurring trope of the Jezebel dominates the construction of black femininity, in which lascivious black women seduce Ladinos only to be metaphorically consumed by them later. The mulatta woman is more often than not constructed in a less monolithic manner, thus leaving some room for a dynamic identity. While the mulatta is still seen as sexual, she is looked upon with a degree of pity for her hybrid identity, and as a result of this pity, the literary voice demonstrates varying degrees of compassion toward her presumed struggle with identity. As I wish to demonstrate, this multifaceted construction of bi-racial individuals has been common in literature for years. For example, in Cuban author Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* (1882), the treatment of lighter-skinned individuals of mixed race is considerably different than that of those with darker skin. The mulatta is sensual and more of a sexual and social threat than the black woman. Furthermore, she can sometimes intermarry with white men, however she is a dubious candidate. Although in the United States the mixed-race person is still considered to be black (due to the one drop of black blood), Honduras follows the Latin American paradigm of racial definition in which it is possible for a bi-racial individual to change race via social relations (Gates 122).

Another characteristic that defines the perception of mulatta behavior has to do with the race and gender of the authors themselves. Among the various approaches to the figure of the mulatta, works can be divided into different categories—white-authored fiction, Afro-descendant-authored fiction, female-authored fiction, and male-authored fiction—each of which gives the reader a unique perspective on the mulatta figure. Much of the literature that has been written about the tragic mulatta adheres to an analysis of racial difference without taking into consideration the question of varying perspectives based on the gender of the writer. For example, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has written about approaches to creating the mixed-race female subject in literature, but focuses more upon the female perspective. She asserts that in the case of the female Afro-descendant writer, she is more apt to choose a path for the construction of the mulatta that is more dynamic:

... black women writers have consistently preferred to emphasize blood rather than slavery. . . . They have not been alone in evoking the trope of the tragic mulatta, but they have informed it with a complexity that no black man or white woman has easily appreciated. . . . By inviting the identification of white readers with the tragic mulatta, black women writers have lured them into the emotional recognition that skin color counts for nothing. (469)

While Fox-Genovese acknowledges the black-white dichotomy of female authors, her analysis does not include the white male construction of mulatta women, though this particular aspect of the depiction of the mulatta archetype is of concern. It is apparent that the male patriarchal gaze upon the black female body becomes even more complex due to the difference in race and gender. As previously stated, a primary factor in this analysis concerns sexuality, or more precisely male desire. In both literature and social situations, dominant racial groups have traditionally valued Caucasian features (usually the hair, nose, lips, and skin) as more desirable than more African features. Hill Collins uses the historical anecdote of a mixed-race slave woman named Harriet Jacobs as an example of the double

jeopardy in which lighter-skinned African American women are placed; she verifies that, for Jacobs, “her appearance as a dusky white woman, made her physically attractive to white men. But the fact that she was Black, and thus part of a group of sexually denigrated women, made her available to white men as no group of white women had been” (“Images” 239). In other words, the mulatta woman gains respect for fitting into the paradigmatic definition of beauty as established by the (whiter) normative group, although due to her blackness she is still touted as open to sexual encounters with white men, for there is no escaping the black blood that supposedly urges her to act seductively. With a mulatta woman, the white man can have the best of both worlds; in the public sphere, he can still keep up appearances by being with a woman who appears to be white, whereas in the private sphere, he can take advantage of her supposedly lascivious sexuality associated with her African heritage. It is this ability of the mulatta woman to pass that leads her to be constructed as more respectable by general standards, yet if the rest of society were to discover her secret, she would be ostracized for her supposed secret sexual perversions (Hobson 48-49).

Besides her sexuality, the other common trait thrust upon the mulatta woman is the idea that she is tragic. Author Annamarie Christiansen affirms that the mulatta is universally seen as a “complicated figure who suggests more about the union of races than their separation” and whose “vulnerability of color usually results in death, often suicide” (78). Anderson takes the description of “tragic” even further by ascribing different stages of development to the figure of the tragic mulatta; on one end of the spectrum, she is innocent and virginal yet at once desperate because her blood thwarts her social aspirations, and on the other end, she is cruel and angry because she is bitter about her tarnished blood. Even when the subject of the work concerns the tragic outcome of the mulatta woman’s life, it appears that it is impossible for many authors to deny the element of her sexuality. Woven into the air of tragedy, many examples of literary production hint that the black blood of the mulatta impels her to act in a lustful manner, but also her ambitions of whitening herself and her offspring compel her to make herself sexually available to powerful white men (Anderson 45-46). In the end, despite her lofty intentions and sexual ambition, some event or possibly a flaw in her personality prevent her from accomplishing her attempted social climbing and endeavors to whiten herself.

In the case of U.S. and Caribbean literature, interracial affairs quite often form the base of many literary examples—for example Dion Boucicault’s play *The Octoroon* (1859), the novel *Quality* (1946) by Cid Ricketts Sumner, and *Cecilia Valdés* (1882) by Villaverde—and add to the tragic tone.⁸ Unlike the mulattas seen in North American and Caribbean cultural production, the mulattas of the Honduran anthology do not become tragic explicitly because they desire to marry a white man, though they do maintain relationships with them; on the contrary, the Honduran mulatta seems to be more entrenched in tragedy due

⁸ In *The Octoroon*, Zoe, a mulatta, falls in love with George, her white cousin. They are unable to marry because she is still legally owned as part of the plantation’s estates, thus foiling her entry into white society. In *Quality*, the mulatta heroine at first desires to enter the white world by marrying her white fiancé, but later regrets this decision and removes herself from the white world. In *Cecilia Valdés*, the mulatta protagonist Cecilia is seduced by her half-brother, a Creole named Leonardo, and has a baby with him. When the relationship does not work, she seeks revenge and is thrown into jail, thus erasing any chance of gaining access to better opportunities.

to her inability to reconcile her racially fragmented identity. Here, cultural identity is confounded with romantic relationships. In “Mulatas de las islas” by Jorge Federico, the Ladino poetic voice expresses his dismay in the transitory relationship that he once shared with a mulatta woman. He writes:

Tú me hubieras amado... Mulata.
Un mes, quizá,
y un día... Y unas horas...
Pero nunca después,
y yo te habría amado, muchacha,
mientras no se extinguieran en tu boca
aquellos nombres bárbaros:
Roatán, Guanaja, Utila,
que me hacían sentir
pirata de tu cuerpo (25)

In this example, we find a prime case in which the mulatta becomes tragic because of her fragmented identity; in some ways the author reconceptualizes the image of the mulatta, but in other ways he adheres to the already established paradigms of the tragic mulatta's relationships with white people. The concept of double-consciousness emerges in that the woman, despite being with a Ladino man, can never completely forget the history of her black ancestors. By mentioning geographical locations such as Roatán and Guanaja, it can be assumed that this particular mulatta is of Garífuna descent.⁹ The poetic voice hints at the doomed aspect of the relationship by placing temporal limits on the duration of the love that they would have shared between them, implying that this romance would have been a temporary relationship, nothing solid. He also mentions that these geographical reminders of the mulatta's past and community would have prevented her from ever truly returning his love. Here we can see that as in the classic interpretation of the mulatta, even though she has formed a relationship with a man who is not black, circumstance will bring her back to her black heritage. Despite the fact that the mulatta is of mixed origins, she hopes to find solidarity within the black community of Honduras.

Nevertheless, her white blood cannot be denied. In a brief verse author Federico writes: “a los barcos que no te recordaban, / a los barcos de gin y de cerveza, / de hombres borrachos y mujeres altas” (26). There, the “hombres borrachos”—that is, sailors of boats laden with beer and gin—are likely English pirates, who were a common sight on the eastern coast of Honduras (Mack 45). It can be deduced that the mixed-race woman who is the subject of this poem is the product of a relationship between a black Garífuna woman and an English pirate, a fact which in turn creates havoc in her construction of self and as a result, creates this tragic depiction of a woman who cannot reconcile with her past sufficiently enough to be able to discover a space for herself in either culture. She has left her home in order to seek her fortune with a Ladino man, and when inserted into this new racial space, she immediately longs for the roots of her black culture.

⁹ The island Roatán is one of the principal loci of the Garífuna diaspora. The Garífuna perceive Roatán to be their homeland, despite their arriving there as part of a forced exodus when the British took over San Vicente.

Returning to the concept of the description of space, we see that the images created of the mulatta relate to solitude, isolation, and insularism. For example, the poetic voice of the poem describes the mulattas who he observes as “[s]olas” and “[p]résbitas en afán de lejanías” (25). While it is true that the mulatta subject of the poem identifies more with her African roots, it is also clear that the narrator of the poem accentuates the fact that mixed-blood women are decentered subjects in that they can neither belong to his Ladino world nor return to the world of their Garífuna ancestors in Roatán. With this dynamic, we see that she conforms to Anderson’s characterization of the mulatta as “restless” and “mysterious” and “inherently a sexual character” (53). The mulatta of the poem is depicted as “mysterious” in that due to her mixed blood, she is unable to relate to either race, and she is also “restless” in moving from place to place and, as the author describes her, in being unstable. Above all, her mixed-race heritage makes her an exotic, sensual image for the poetic voice; she does not associate with the civilized world but instead with a more natural world bathed in a sensual aura: “Brisa del trébol verde sobre el pelo. / Sobre los hombros y en los senos altos, / cuerpos de bugambilia florecida” (26) and “mientras te me ofrecías desnuda como el mar” (25).

The tragedy of this mulatta lies in the fact that, according to the narrator, she realizes that she cannot be part of his white world, but she also realizes that in spite of her nostalgia for the places of her Garífuna ancestors, she cannot return to those locations, either. She has become displaced and a vagrant among races, while still maintaining a sensuality that is represented as a biological trait of her race. Like many of the fictional tragic mulattas from different parts of the Americas, after choosing to be with a Ladino man, she becomes cognizant of the fact that she does not belong to this world; unlike many of the other literary mulatta heroines, her place is not found within the black community, and she must find a third space in wandering itself: “a través de los vientos. / Sobre rutas amargas” (26). Many of the tragic mulattas meet a sad fate in American and Caribbean fiction. In this situation, it becomes apparent that the fate of this particular woman does not fall far from this formula, for she has been stripped of self-definition and belonging. With the poetic narrative, we can see that she is destined to continue searching for this unacknowledged and unnamed third space of acceptance and community for an undetermined amount of time, thereby suffering a sort of spiritual death due to her double-consciousness.

Although not as detailed as “Mulatas de las islas,” another glimpse into the construction of mulatta identity appears in the anthology. In the poem “El son en Puerto Limón” by Barrera, the poetic voice describes a scene in which the black inhabitants of Puerto Limón dance to “ritmos de fiebre y carbón” (13).¹⁰ Of particular interest to the Ladino observer is an Afro-Honduran couple that hold tightly to one another as they dance. However, his interest in this dance is broken by the sudden and unexpected appearance of a mulatta:

Y una mulata al pasar
muestra los dientes más blancos
que dos terrones de sal.

¹⁰ Though Puerto Limón is a port town in Costa Rica, there is also a municipality on the Caribbean coast of Honduras called Limón.

“Se va el caimán,
se va el caimán,
se va para Barranquilla”. (14)

Clearly, the mulatta of the poem is not included in the festivities along with the rest of the black participants. The poetic narrative distinctly underscores the fact that she only passes by the gathering, and we can assume that she cannot be included in that revelry because she is of mixed race and therefore different than the group that the poetic voice identifies as black. Although it appears that the following verses “se va el caimán, / se va para Barranquilla” serve more as background music for the dancing, the lyrics also connect the actions of the mulatta with the actions of the poem (14).¹¹ Just as the caiman must, she too is forced to leave—and indirectly asked to leave through the lyrics of the song—due to her outsider status. As a result of this dismissal, she is similar to the mulattas in the poem by Federico in that she becomes a tragic figure due to displacement. Once again, the mulatta appears as a solitary figure trapped in liminal space between the cohesive gathering of Afro-Honduran dancers and the Ladino poetic voice and shunned by both groups.

As I have stated, both poems re-imagine and reconstruct the image of the mulatta. Tragic in her displacement, though potentially sexual in her conduct, the poetic narratives insinuate that she despairs at her inability to find community. There is no explicit reference to national identity in the poems, yet there are implicit allusions to the effects of miscegenation within Honduras. That the mulatta is not accepted, unstable, isolated, and destined to wander verifies that the hybrid subject can neither geographically nor socially find refuge within a Honduran national identity, but can only exist as a peripheral figure. Even depicted as a sexual object as seen in “Mulatas de las islas,” she has no permanence, no hope of producing offspring who would push Honduras toward a new racial identity. As Federico laments, she is unsuccessful in loving him due to her roaming spirit and her lack of home. As a result, we can surmise that these two examples of poetry conclude that mixed-race women cannot exist within the Ladino community, nor be part of the Afro-Honduran community, but have to question their origins and ability to belong to any group.

¿Nuevo Concepto de la Raza?

In this analysis, I have proposed that the *poesía negra* movement, in spite of a desire to highlight the Afro-Honduran presence in national identity, projects a confusing trajectory. It cannot be denied that Afro-Hondurans come from a rich and diverse background; through their grueling labor as slaves and banana plantation workers, they contributed greatly to the economic building of a nation, and in contemporary times, they embrace many roles in Honduran society (Euraque 82-83). Unfortunately, however dynamic their potential may be, we can see in Barrera’s anthology that their image is constructed with few options for multilayered representations; the works offer a sparse selection of representations that present stereotypical depictions of blackness. In other words, the poetry does little to change the image of the Afro-Honduran female as anything other than sensual and complicit in acts of perversion. Barrera’s claim that the poetic attempts to create “el nuevo concepto de la raza” have succeeded proves to be questionable, for in

¹¹ Though uncredited in the anthology, the song cited in the poem is probably “Se va el caimán” (1941) by Colombian composer José María Peñaranda.

these pages we find that Ladino concepts of race still follow the stereotypical pattern that has existed in Latin America for years. As I interpret his idea of this “nuevo concepto de la raza,” there has been little change. It appears that Barrera and the other poets of the anthology have agreed that blackness has few options for interpretation, and because of these limited parameters, the poets of Barrera’s work have shut the door on a more ample construction of blackness. As a consequence, the authors’ efforts to insert the figure of the Afro-Honduran in the canon of literary production are limited.

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