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Review/Reseña

Eleuterio Santiago-Díaz, *Escritura afropuertorriqueña y modernidad*.
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The ‘Failed’ Project of Blackness in Contemporary

Afro-Puerto Rican Discourse

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Escritura afropuertorriqueña y modernidad (2007), by Eleuterio Santiago-Díaz, is an insightful critical work on contemporary afropuertorican discourse with an emphasis on the writings of Carmelo Rodríguez Torres. The work commences by situating Puerto Rico in the “Black Atlantic,” that is, the greater African Diaspora. Ironically, Santiago-Díaz begins and ends his study noting that his research on Afro-Puerto Rico and Rodríguez Torres is simultaneously an affirmation and a negation of black identity because it counters official discourses of racial homogeneity

during the island's nation-building period which posited blackness over whiteness. This racial oppression and suppression of blackness stems from early twentieth-century (1930s and 1940s) Puerto Rican national discourse which erased blackness from the national imaginary and contributed to the failed black project of modernity. Thus, Santiago-Díaz argues that afropuertorican discourse is a failed modern project stemming from Antonio de Nebrija's seminal text *Gramática castellana* (1492) and the literary whitening that resulted from it. Instead of illustrating the complexity of Afro-Puerto Rican discourse, these contemporary texts illustrate the suppression of Afrocentricity that can be traced to the publication of *Gramática*. As the title suggests, Santiago-Díaz places the work in modernity and views it from a cultural studies perspective, stemming from the identity politics research of black British cultural critic Paul Gilroy (*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* 1993) and the late Afro-American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois' work on double consciousness (*The Souls of Black Folk* 1903), that is, the duality of being both black and (North) American, explicates the problematic of identity and the complexities of it in Puerto Rico, which is rooted in multiple representations of identity (white, mixed-race, mulatto, black, etc.) Finally, he uses performance studies to illustrate that blackness is a performance that is never realized due to a colonial discourse of whiteness.

In chapter one, "Puerto Rico en el mapa del Black Atlantic", Santiago-Díaz appropriates Gilroy's metaphor of the ship to initiate discussion of the arrival of black Africans to Puerto Rico. In comparison to the black British or the black North-American Atlantic for example, "black writing" did not develop as a separate entity in Puerto Rico until the 1970s. The high rates of illiteracy (about 90% of the total population) in Puerto Rico in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries disproportionately affected the black masses and inhibited the fruition of black writing and critical thought. Santiago-Díaz, however, counters the official discourse that blacks never constituted a significant proportion of the population, which many believed was an acceptable reason for the absence of an Afro-Puerto Rican literary movement until the 1970s. In fact, blacks and "coloreds"

represented a significant portion of the population (52.32%) and outnumbered whites (49). For example, Isabelo Zenón Cruz's polemical encyclopedic work, *Narcisco descubre su trasero: el negro en la cultura puertorriqueña* (1974)—which received a hostile reception—questioned the accepted myth of racial harmony in Puerto Rico and demystified racial harmony.

Santiago-Díaz then applies Du Bois' metaphor of double-consciousness to the racial framework of Puerto Rico. Double consciousness relates to the predicament of Afro-Puerto Ricans, but goes beyond the duality that Du Bois posited to explain the plight of blacks in the Western world, particularly those of combined Anglophone and African ancestry. The double consciousness of blacks in Puerto Rico results from a society and hegemony empowered by a minority white *criollo* elite (59). Furthermore, many blacks in Puerto Rico find it difficult to profess their *negritude* or openly discuss racial problems because discussions of race counter official discourses of supposed racial harmony and democracy. As Santiago-Díaz's text exemplifies, this phenomenon is not new and is found in popular culture and literature. For example, the songs of popular Afro-Puerto Rican sixties singer Ruth Fernández embraced her *puertorriqueñidad* but denied racial conflict on the Island. The hostile racial environment on the Island and the denial of racial problems has led many such as contemporary writer Mayra Santos-Febres to connect with other writers of the African Diaspora outside of the Island, such as Afro-Colombian Manuel Zapata Olivella, for example. Black writers definitely lacked a voice in pre-contemporary Puerto Rican literature because it was rooted in literary whiteness.

Chapter two, "Espectáculos elípticos de la literatura afropuertorriqueña", illustrates how the Spanish language further marginalized Afro-Puerto Ricans leading not only to racial whitening but literary *blanqueamiento* as well. Santiago-Díaz traces this linguistic discrimination to the fifteenth-century Spanish grammarian Antonio de Nebrija who, in his seminal text *Gramática castellana* (1492), delineated the rules for Spanish grammar. Black writers were forced to ascribe to an official literary and linguistic discourse that did not reflect an authentic

African voice. In fact, Santiago-Díaz points to the Castilian language as the origin of Afro-hispanic linguistic and literary suppression in Puerto Rican discourse. This norm prevented the fruition of an authentic Afro-Puerto Rican discourse. Thus, Santiago-Díaz views Spanish grammar as the initiation of linguistic racial discrimination because it forces writers of African descent to choose between an official discourse of *blanqueamiento* and an authentic one that represents their blackness.

Santiago-Díaz further analyzes the art of signifying and trickery in the works of Puerto Rican writers Lydia Cabrera and Ana Lydia Vega, who both treat Afro-Caribbean themes in their short stories. For example, Cabrera utilizes the turtle as a signifying trope because it “is seen as the prototype of antiquity, astuteness, and wisdom” in *Cuentos negros de Cuba*, and Ana Lydia Vega utilizes humor to deal with racial prejudice (101, 104). Vega’s short story “Encarnablado” is of particular interest because it has not been associated with Afro-Caribbean themes, culture, or folklore even though the author denounces and/or illustrates racial prejudice in the short story. The title of the short story references the phrase “cara nublada” or “cloudy face,” a racial euphemism utilized throughout Puerto Rico that reflects an obsession with avoiding discussions of race by using racial euphemisms. As Santiago-Díaz notes, “cara nublada” is an ellipsis and points linguistically to the suppression of Afro-hispanic thought in literature.

Santiago-Díaz returns to the theory of Gilroy and the Black Atlantic and inserts Afro-Puerto Rican discourse into the dialogue on modernity and its relation to the African Diaspora in the third chapter, “Raza y modernidad en Puerto Rico: las décadas de los treinta y cuarenta”. Thus, he emphasizes how Rodríguez Torres’ texts respond to the doubleness of the modern project and its black subjects, that is, being of “an expanded West but not completely out of it” (115). As Santiago-Díaz suggests, Rodríguez Torres’ texts evoke the same duality of modernity because his writings are simultaneously about “urbanization and bourgeoisie and poverty and the Island of Vieques” (115). The instances of modernity that define the works of Rodríguez Torres can be found in the racial and modern project of the thirties and forties in Puerto Rico and particularly the essays of Antonio

Pedreira (*Insularismo* 1934). These works and others respond to the intervention of the United States in 1898 and Puerto Rico's subsequent quest to maintain its Hispanic heritage despite its North American occupation. In *Insularismo*, Pedreira holds blacks responsible for the Island's backwardness and present state of decadence. *Insularismo's* positive reception and widespread dissemination contrasts sharply with the weak reception of José Colombán Rosario's and Justina Carrión's *El negro: Haití-Estados Unidos-Puerto Rico* (1940). *El negro* reflects the discriminatory practices of the Popular Democratic Party and its promotion of cultural material that advocated whiteness over blackness.

This minimization of racial problems heightened with the publication of Tomás Blanco's *El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico* (1942), which described racial prejudice on the Island merely as "innocent child's play" (124). The goal was to describe Puerto Rico as a Spanish and white country and to diminish the role of blackness in Puerto Rican society, culture, and politics. Luis Palés Matos was one writer of the generation of the thirties who recognized the importance of the African in Puerto Rican culture. Although his works initially were not well received because they advocated the role of blackness at a time when Puerto Rico wanted to return to its Spanish roots, "it reduced the social, political, and humane dimension of the black experience" (134). Thus, although the works of Palés Matos celebrate blacks as primitive figures, Santiago-Díaz concedes that they reflect to a certain extent the dominant racial ideology of the thirties and the forties. René Marqués recuperates the racial discourse of Pedreira and others of the Generation of the Thirties to convey the Puerto Rican's docility in his essays, "El ruido y la furia de los críticos del señor Kazan" and "El puertorriqueño dócil". In turn, language, culture, and speech served to marginalize black populations during the decades of the thirties and forties.

Chapter four, "Cuando se eclipsa la comunidad tradicional y la luz de la modernidad no alumbra: la crisis de Vieques según Carmelo Rodríguez Torres", conveys the importance of Carmelo Rodríguez Torres in Puerto Rican literary studies. As a member of the Seventies Generation, he was one of the writers to initiate the new Latin-American novel in Puerto

Rico. His first published novel, *Veinte siglos después del homicidio* (1971), is an example of the new novel because of its use of stream of consciousness and narrative fragmentation. Despite this, his works have not been read along this vein because they focused on blacks and received poor reviews from Puerto Rican literary critics. Santiago-Díaz characterizes the depiction of Vieques as an apocalypse, a town on the brink of destruction. The oppressive environment of *Veinte siglos* reflects the United States' increase of military bases in Puerto Rico during World War II. The construction of military bases led to the destruction of several communities in Vieques and Aguadilla. Although the United States' presence and the construction of the bases initially led to economic progress, the island found itself in economic decline with several residents vacating the island once this economic boom ceased. The bibliographic references to the apocalypse reflect the oppressive environment, the dislocation, and the lack of economic progress. *Veinte siglos* points to the lack of government involvement in the financial and economic crisis of the island. The environmental decadence, robbery, and lasciviousness all symbolize the apocalyptic status of Vieques, which is plagued by destruction and debauchery. The environmental sickness leads to the physical and mental sickness of the people and annihilation of the total community. Although these vices are characteristic of poor and disenfranchised populations as a group, as the novel indicates through its central black characters, they disproportionately affect members of the African Diaspora.

Santiago-Díaz incorporates the short story "Paraíso" and the novel *La casa y la llama fiera* by Rodríguez Torres into his analysis to illustrate Afro-Puerto Rican discourse three centuries after the advent of modernity in chapter five "Del lado de 'acá' de la modernización: la experiencia afropuertorriqueña y la deconstrucción del mito de la gran familia". Rodríguez Torres' texts question and destroy the national myth of the great family, a myth propagated during the 1930s and 1940s by *criollo* leaders such as Tomás Blanco, who, as previously analyzed, minimized racial prejudice on the Island. Rodríguez Torres' texts dismantle these national myths of homogeneity and happiness by illustrating the decadence of Vieques, the destruction of the nuclear family, and the existence of racial

prejudice. As Santiago-Díaz suggests, the title "Paraíso," is ironic because it parodies the fact that the Island is a by-product of a venture capitalism that has victimized it economically and geographically. In fact, it is anything but a paradise. From the outside, it appears that the nuclear family has achieved the perfect middle class lifestyle in the metropolis of San Juan. In the short story, an afropuertorican professor and writer leaves his black girlfriend and marries a white woman, Beatriz to "mejorar la raza." Rodríguez Torres modernizes and explores in more detail the racial identity of the writer (Aldo) and his quest to whiten as he rejects his black girlfriend Gloria in favor of white Beatriz. Rodríguez Torres further explores the seemingly perfect relationship between the writer and Beatriz who have bought into the perfect middle class existence. The relationship, however, is dysfunctional and illustrates the psychosis and emasculation of the writer by Beatriz who is tormented by his blackness. Emasculated physically by a vasectomy and racially as a black man living in a white world, the writer is constantly controlled by his wife. As Santiago-Díaz suggests, the vasectomy is not only a symbol of his emasculation but also assures that no more brown babies will be born allowing the nation to achieve its quest of *blanqueamiento*.

La casa picks up where "Paraíso" left off and further explores race relations on the Island with the arrival of the writer's two nieces from Vieques. As Santiago-Díaz points out, the novel further explores the destruction of the writer. The nieces serve as a reminder of the writer's past and his blackness. Furthermore, with Beatriz's poor treatment of them it becomes clear that she has separated Aldo from his roots. The destruction of this family is marked by internal racial prejudice as well as that of the society as a whole. Thus, as Santiago-Díaz explains, the myth of the great family propagated during the 1940s pertained to certain sectors of the population such as *criollos* and members of the upper class population and denied happiness and success to those who did not belong to either because of race, class, or both. Santiago-Díaz indicates that the works of Rodríguez-Torres simultaneously strive for the articulation of an authentic Afro-Puerto Rican and Afro-Caribbean discourse and identity but fail because

they reinforce national myths of sexuality. In the end, black male characters fail to break the cycle of racial and sexual oppression.

Santiago-Díaz returns to Rodríguez Torres' collection of short stories (*Cinco cuentos*) in chapter six, "En busca de los pasos perdidos: ¿la reconstitución de un sujeto escindido o el 'fracaso' de un proyecto escritural afrocéntrico?", Santiago-Díaz analyzes the short story "Fuencarral" which again tries to resolve the problematic of identity of the black Puerto Rican. Specifically, the story deals with the main character Fuencarral who was hung for seducing Rosita Urquijo. According to popular myth, he does not die but rather snatches the rope from his neck and takes off followed by numerous women. This among other tales has transformed Fuencarral into a symbol of virility and fertility. However, it is the short stories' use of myth that distinguishes it from the others. Santiago-Díaz compares the myth of Fuencarral with that of Mackandal, the literary character mystified in Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (1949) who, from the perspective of the enslaved Haitian population, survives despite being burnt alive. Fuencarral not only possesses "magical" powers like his literary predecessor Mackandal but as a mulatto he symbolizes "lo otro," someone who is opposite of the dominant culture.

The short story "Este pueblo" breaks with the dichotomy of a black man who falls in love with a white woman because the author inverts the paradigm with a black woman married to a non-black husband. Santiago-Díaz argues that perhaps Rodríguez Torres does this to break with the tradition of black men married to white women who are doomed to fail. Furthermore, the husband, who is of lighter lineage, is dead and the patriarch in this novel is the black grandfather appropriately named Solimán, a patriarchal figure who represents the character's African heritage through his Africanized speech and songs. This link to Africa does not allow the characters to come to terms with their black heritage and they continuously strive to self-identify. Thus, the work does not stray away from myths, and the black heritage is discontinued with Solimán's grandson, a fragmented character plagued by double consciousness.

All told, Santiago-Díaz makes an important contribution to the field of (Afro)Latin American and Hispanic Caribbean studies by positioning

Puerto Rico in the broader Black Atlantic. Furthermore, he offers a new perspective on *afropuertorriqueñidad* by centering his study on the modernizing project of Carmelo Rodríguez-Torres and, by extension, the black island of Vieques. In addition, he strays away from the black-as-object study that has characterized many studies on Puerto Rico and has almost exclusively focused on Luis Palés Matos. Instead, Santiago-Díaz centers the problematic of blackness on the remote island of Vieques and analyzes the works of the relatively unknown writer Rodríguez Torres. Santiago-Díaz transgresses geographical, literary and cultural boundaries by simultaneously inserting the works of Rodríguez-Torres into debates on Puerto Rican nationality, culture, and literature and that of African Diaspora studies. Although the title of the Santiago-Díaz's book suggests that the piece is about Afro-Puerto Rican writing and its relation to modernity, the author primarily focuses on the texts of Rodríguez Torres in most chapters. While such an approach offers a noteworthy contribution on *afropuertorriqueñidad* (by analyzing the works of Carmelo Rodríguez Torres), additional studies could include the writings of other contemporary Afro-Puerto Rican writers to see if these issues are present in their works and determine whether they share the same failed modern project of black articulation.