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Nanas negras: The Silenced Women in Rosario Ferré and Olga Nolla

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ABSTRACT

Black characters in Puerto Rican fiction function as the backdrop or, to use José Luis González's metaphor, the lower floor of a four-storied country. Contemporary Puerto Rican women writers bring gender issues to the foreground. However, black women characters remain marginalized. *The House on the Lagoon* (Rosario Ferré) and *El manuscrito de Miramar* (Olga Nolla) serve as a departure for our exploration of the silenced or contrived representation of black women in contemporary Puerto Rican fiction, given the fact that women writing the novels within the novels belong to the upper, white, educated elite. [Key words: race, women, silence, Rosario Ferré, Olga Nolla, Puerto Rican literature]

In 1980, Puerto Rican author and critic José Luis González published "El país de cuatro pisos" ("The Four-Storeyed Country"), an essay that marks a crucial moment in Puerto Rican letters. González uses the analogy of a house to present a Puerto Rico that is racially and economically constituted of four "floors." These have interacted and come into conflict since Puerto Rico was inserted into the vortex of the Western world's historical and racial constructs. Puerto Rican society has kept its Afro-Caribbean elements in a metaphorical basement, whereas González forcefully places them on the first floor of the nation/house. Juan Flores asserts that "the major contribution of 'El país de cuatro pisos' to the tradition of Puerto Rican interpretation is the search for the popular grounding of the national culture" (174). Nevertheless, Puerto Rico's racial tensions continue, as contemporary works of fiction clearly demonstrate. Other scholars in a variety of fields (linguistics, history, sociology, literary criticism), such as Manuel Álvarez Nazario (*El elemento afronegroide en el español de Puerto Rico*—1974), Isabelo Zenón Cruz (*Narciso descubre su trasero* [*El negro en la cultura puertorriqueña*]—1975), Jalil Sued Badillo and Ángel López Cantos (*Puerto Rico negro*—1986), Lydia Milagros González and Ana Lydia Vega (*El machete de Ogún*—1990), and Marie Ramos Rosado (*La mujer negra en la literatura puertorriqueña*—1999), have also tried to debunk the Puerto Rican myth that racism does not exist on the island.

In Puerto Rican literature, traditionally and usually, the Black characters in fiction function as the backdrop or, to use González's metaphor, the lower floor of a four-storeyed country. Puerto Rican women writers bring gender issues to the foreground; yet, in spite of that, black women characters remain somewhat marginalized. Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* (1995) and Olga Nolla's *El manuscrito de Miramar* (1998) serve as a departure for our exploration of the still partially silenced voices of black women in contemporary Puerto Rican fiction. The study of black women through historical and social lenses will allow us to review how race and gender play a significant role in the political and economic power struggles in present-day Puerto Rican society.

A mythical reconstruction of Puerto Rican history pretends that Puerto Ricans are the seamless result of a perfect blending of the Taíno, the African, and, above all else, the European (Spanish) "races." On March 23, 1924, the influential editor and contributor of the *Boletín histórico de Puerto Rico*, Dr. Cayetano Coll y Toste, responds to a question on the origins of the *jíbaro* by using "historical evidence" (all of it recorded by whites). The *jíbaro* results from the mixing of the Spanish and the native populations in the mountains. Spanish and blacks mixed on the coastal plains, and therefore, he claims that in five or ten centuries "no se encontrará un tipo genuinamente negro en toda la isla" (158). Other Puerto Rican authors have also been preoccupied with racial issues. Part of the emphasis of the earlier *Negrismo* movement in Puerto Rico, associated to white poet Luis Palés Matos, was to bring to the foreground the "blackness" present in Puerto Rican culture. His poetry brought recognition to some of the contributions the descendants of slaves had made to Puerto Rican culture. As explored by Palés Matos, these contributions tend to be limited to elements of popular culture such as music and food. The Afro-Caribbean characters and, especially, the black and mulatto women remained exotic, sexual, sensual, and Other.

Cuban author and critic Antonio Benítez's Rojo's *prise de conscience* during the Cold War is due to two old black women "walking in a certain kind of way," who passed beneath his balcony during an evacuation due to the "imminence" of a nuclear attack.

Admitting that he cannot describe that "certain kind of way," he adds that "there was a kind of ancient and golden powder between their gnarled legs, a scent of basil and mint in their dress, a symbolic, ritual wisdom in their gesture and their gay chatter. I knew then at once that there would be no apocalypse" (10). Often in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, black women appear as out-of-the-ordinary figures capable of averting a nuclear disaster, the destruction of a manuscript, or of a national identity —as we shall see later in this work. They can walk, smell, act, and appear at selected moments within literary texts, yet, amidst the overall presentation of the text and the other characters, the reader can at times have a hard time seizing the importance of what they are saying because they are relegated to a secondary level. What is important is that they do indeed appear and save many in the Caribbean from various disasters.

Although our debt to the descendants of African slaves is great, they are but a "performative" moment in Benítez Rojo's study. However brief or seemingly marginal these incursions may be in the novels we are to examine, they are in fact important pillars of the narrative. They may be somewhat silenced and "invisible," but their contribution to our understanding of the plot in particular and Puerto Rican history in general is akin to the quasi-invisible and strong Afro-Caribbean presence in the first floor of the nation/house that González discusses in his essay. The neglect or sidestepping of these characters and the racism they confront is especially poignant when those descendants of Africans being discussed are women.

As for women of African descent, the stereotypical perception is that they are capable of bringing out the most intense of sexual passions in those who cross their paths. The Afro-Caribbean woman, as Claudette M. Williams points out, tends to be associated with the arousal of unbridled sexuality. The mulatta especially is considered passion incarnate, and so the language used to describe her tends to reflect this vision of her. According to Williams, male authors

> perceived and experienced, vicariously, uninhibited sexual pleasure [through their representations of the Afro-Caribbean woman]. But they did not consider the "genteel" discourse that euphemizes human eroticism an appropriate vehicle for their representations. Any potential for celebrating the release from sexual inhibition that she symbolized was therefore largely vitiated by this unrestrained, and at times, crude language. The poets succeeded in authenticating rather than transforming a discourse that has been used historically to degrade the sexuality of the woman of African descent. (56)

In contemporary fiction, especially that done by Puerto Rican women writers such as Rosario Ferré and Olga Nolla, among others, race and gender issues are being presented and negotiated in a more complex manner. The language used to depict women of African descent undergoes a revision. The process of revisiting the language is not complete, but as Catherine Den Tandt reminds us, writers such as Ferré and Nolla, "to varying degrees, talked back to patriarchal and conservative (read elite, Hispanophile) representations of the nation-space by dismantling prior canons and depicting an urban and Afro-Caribbean Puerto Rico" (84). The notion that the Afro-Caribbean Puerto Rican is no longer an inhabitant of non-urban spaces is an important one. This signifies that they are no longer just field workers. Moreover, it also allows for a variety of gender issues to come to the surface,

and although the representation of Afro-Caribbean women is still not perfect, critical investigations into the discriminating and biased mores of Puerto Rican society have begun in earnest.

The older, female characters, for the most part, remain as nannies, housekeepers, or cooks or a combination of these. Nevertheless, changes in their presentation or in the voice they are given have occurred. In the case of Ferré's novel, they are given speaking parts and significant roles to play within the plot. As for the younger generation of mulattas (such as Coral and Perla Ustariz in Ferré's novel), these are more educated and professional women who are not afraid to speak their minds. Even so, many continue to be the object of marginalization, hence their novelistic fate reflects the racism and prejudice that are still pervasive in Puerto Rican society. The characters can only fight against discrimination if they are educated and given the opportunity to succeed. The mulatta, especially, still exudes sexuality, and the male characters are physically attracted to her, even when she is an educated woman.

Women novelists such as Ferré and Nolla attempt to incorporate as many women of color as they can and try to explore their backgrounds and examine their historical silencing and ill treatment at the hands of a racist elite. Ferré and Nolla offer renewed efforts when looking at the plight of these women of color with new eyes, but nonetheless, the characters are still part of a society that discriminates against people based on their gender and race. What remains to be seen is how much more significant their roles will be in future narratives as Puerto Rican society continues to evolve. Afro-Puerto Rican women writers such as Mayra Santos Febres positively impact the Puerto Rican literary milieu. Her work renews attempts to bring to the foreground the multiple and varied contributions of Afro-Puerto Ricans and not just limit the presentation to the popular elements of Puerto Rican culture.

In some instances, the black female or mulatta characters themselves denounce the racial as well as the gender discriminations they face. In Ferré's novel, *The House on the Lagoon*, the well-to-do, white, Puerto Rican female writer protagonist, Isabel Monfort de Mendizábal, gives voice to Petra Avilés (the rarely heard black servant or nanny) and some of her descendants and also to the mulatta Ermelinda Quiñones (a dressmaker) and her descendants. Olga Nolla's *El manuscrito de Miramar* gives voice to a black nanny in a separate chapter (#13) in the reconstructed first-person narrative done by María Isabel Gómez-Sabater, daughter of Sonia the author of the original manuscript.

The crucial role that Afro-Puerto Rican women have played in the construction of the nation is highlighted. However, their presence in the text remains problematic precisely because they still represent what is going on in contemporary Puerto Rican society, namely, that they have some more opportunities and a voice, but one that is in a separate space, either in the basement or the kitchen of the house or above the garage or in a separate chapter, and at times isolated from the rest of the characters. This is partly due to the fact that they belong to the realm of oral tradition. They are not the ones writing their history, and although present, are still marginalized within the official discourse oftentimes controlled by the whites writing history.

Recalling González's analogy, the Afro-Puerto Rican women are the foundational first floor, and as such are strong but remain underneath the other floors. Their role in the narrative helps to support the protagonists, and, as will be seen, they play a significant role in the development of the plot, and by extension the development of the nation/house. These often silent characters are present and ready to help the protagonists, even when these protagonists may not have given them much thought at first. In fact, in both novels, an earlier erasure or whitening of the Afro-Puerto

Rican women's pages turns out to be an important part of the text in a writing exercise that may be described as palimpsestic. They—both the Afro-Puerto Rican women and their pages—are being written over in a different light by the writer/protagonists once their significance is established and re-appreciated by the white writer/protagonists of the novels.

Isabel, as she reconstructs the family's genealogical lines, retraces the color lines that Puerto Rican society at large has had to face throughout its history. These lines, drawn in blood, are a painful reminder of a discrimination that still exists, even though it takes the male protagonist, Quintín Mendizábal, the entire novel to admit it.

In María Isabel's case, she is the one who recognizes Toñita, the black nanny at her mother's funeral. When Toñita's stream of consciousness is presented in the inauspicious thirteenth chapter, she points out the race, gender, and class divides. It is as if the novel were signaling what bad luck it is to be born female and dark in Puerto Rico. As noted by Toñita, the telling example is don Felipe's reaction to her presence: "noto que don Felipe se me queda mirando y le pregunta a la hija que quién soy yo. No puede evitar darse cuenta que no soy igual a la otra gente que hay aquí" (171). She is different; she is a black woman of a lower class in the midst of very well-to-do white people. What is fascinating is to see her accept it as if it were natural, as if these divides were to be expected and respected. Like Petra, she belongs to a different generation of women of color who did not feel the need to be raising their voices and expressing how they felt and lived the racism they experienced, because it was taken for granted. Toñita does not have a full name, just a nickname (for Antonia) in its diminutive form. As such, it serves as a marker of her quasi-invisibility or her status as a child being treated in a condescending and patronizing way. The fact that she does not have a last name signals her seemingly transitory condition and marginality vis-à-vis the well-to-do characters in the novel.

In "The Four-Storeyed Country," González divides the racial and economic development of Puerto Rico into four distinct moments. The first Puerto Ricans, he states, were black Puerto Ricans in the sense that these were "*criollos*," meaning they were born in the new country from African slaves. He makes a strong case for this bold assertion, for even when Spaniards had children on the island, they nonetheless considered themselves as nothing else but Spaniards with the possibility of going back "home" to Spain, *la Madre Patria*. The Africans, who could only aspire to return to Guinea (the afterlife), had no home to return to as far as the Spanish authorities were concerned. They, together with the Spaniards and the Taínos, constitute the first floor of the Puerto Rican nation/house. The African group remains the most silenced and hidden of the three.

In González's essay, gender was never an issue, whereas in these novels, gender is at the core of the narratives. Ferré's novel has as its center a female voice: Isabel, a white, well-to-do Puerto Rican woman writer. Isabel's novel is written and rewritten by the characters as they interact with her and unveil unpleasant traits of Puerto Rican society (racism, *machismo*, classism). Isabel's interactions with her husband, Quintín, and the Afro-Caribbean servant, Petra Avilés, contribute to the unveiling of racism as practiced among the elite. Yet the exchanges are revisited because a woman is now compiling and telling the story. Petra and her extended family literally occupy that foundational space, the cellar of the multiple reincarnations of the house on the lagoon. Or they live at Lucumí beach, the mangroves, or the Las Minas slum. These are all "black" spaces in Ferré's novel, separate and distinct from the above-the-ground floors of the house. Yet without them the house would not run smoothly.

These background characters allow the likes of Isabel (and in Nolla's novel, Sonia and María Isabel) to achieve their goals as creative and outspoken women.

Both novels reflect the complexity of the race issue. Puerto Ricans have distinctions that date back to the colonial times and its inflexible, racial pyramidal structure. The white sugar planters were on top, and they lived on the coastal plains overseeing their sugar cane plantations. Next came the poorer white coffee planters, who lived in the mountains. Some of these planters came from South America fleeing the Wars of Independence; others were the Europeans lured by the Real Cédula de Gracias of 1815, which granted land to Europeans willing to settle and cultivate the poor colony of Puerto Rico at that time. From their descendants, the romantic figure of the *jíbaro* develops. These "poor" whites constitute the second level in González's house analogy. At the bottom of the pyramid of races, we have the mulattos—descendants of the masters and their black slaves. Finally, we find the African slaves, who also lived on the coastal plains. Some have been able to buy their freedom from their masters. Since slavery was not abolished until 1873, they constitute an important silenced racial group. For González, American occupants constitute the last group, and both Ferré and Nolla allude to their presence on the island and the views on race and gender they have contributed to Puerto Rican society.

The racial question, then, also tends to run in tandem with the political (i.e., national identity issues). In 1898, a considerable majority of the Puerto Rican working class welcomed the United States presence. It was a way, they thought, to settle accounts with the ruling class who had dominated the economy and politics and wanted to maintain close ties with Spain and what they represented, including the racial pyramid. The racist patriarch, Isabel's father-in-law, Buenaventura Mendizábal, best exemplifies this position. Unfortunately, with the American presence, the island now had to face another level of imported racism to add to its existing one. In her novel, Ferré dramatizes how upper-class Puerto Rican families had to reconsider their racial constructs. Puerto Rican families, traveling through the American South, soon after acquiring American citizenship in 1917 are forced to come to terms with racial segregation in the continental United States:

> It was during these trips to the United States that well-to-do families began to realize some surprising facts which reaffirmed their belief that the old ways were the best, and that it was important their children abide by them [maintain white racial purity]. When they boarded the train at Jacksonville, for example, they learned that black passengers couldn't travel in the same Pullman coaches as whites. As long as the train traveled through the South, Negroes had to use a different bathroom and go to a different restaurant car. This was an alarming discovery and at first these families were so amazed they couldn't believe their eyes. It would never have happened in their country, they thought, where everyone could eat or make water in the same place. The concept of equality under law, which the new democratic regime supposedly had brought to the island and which they had so earnestly embraced because they wanted to be good American citizens, was interpreted very different on the mainland. (24-25)

In Puerto Rico, these characters belonging to the well-to-do ruling families never sensed there was any segregation or discrimination. As part of the Puerto Rican elite

on the island, they were "whites" in spite of not being "white" by United States' standards. Hence there exists a need to emphasize the Spanish heritage, which, because it is European, is believed to be superior to that of the United States. This reinterpretation of the Puerto Rican racial and cultural past is carried out at the expense of the contributions the descendants of Africans have made. These contributions, not only to Puerto Rico's miscegenation but also to its music, food, art, and culture, are deemed inferior by this elite because they are not European. For blacks and poor whites, to go back to these Hispanic roots as they were understood and prescribed by the elite was actually a step backwards into the Spanish era of colonization. Upon realizing that their olive-colored skins cause suspicion, Puerto Ricans belonging to the elite embrace the English language more ardently and play the part of Caucasian-Americans.

Nolla's novel presents the dilemma through Antonio (Sonia's son), who states that

> en California soy un hispano y siempre seré un hispano. Quise asimilarme a la cultura anglosajona cuando llegué a Berkeley, después de todo, era blanco e hijo de ricos y en el Perpetuo Socorro me habían hecho sentir que yo era un norteamericano igual que cualquier otro de cualquier otro estado o región . . . Las monjas norteamericanas decían que el gobierno y sus escuelas públicas que enseñaban en español eran para los pobres. (175)

Toñita's daughters probably attended those schools.

Meanwhile on the island, to a certain extent, the acquisition of U.S. citizenship relaxes the Puerto Rican mores, and women start to go out unaccompanied and participate in the workforce. The majority of the women who join the workforce are, out of necessity, those of Afro-Caribbean descent. The women of the elite did not have to work. They could indulge in artistic or philanthropic endeavors; or in Nolla's case, strive to be physicians. The integration of race and gender issues and the tensions that ensue are presented in Ferré's novel as follows:

> ...before long the sons of the well-to-do began to eye the bare arms and shoulders of the beautiful mulatto girls, who following the American custom, went everywhere unaccompanied and worked where they pleased. The beauty of the quadroons, which until then was a hidden treasure, was suddenly discovered by the young men of "good families," and there was a veritable epidemic of racially mixed liaisons on the island. (23)

Significantly, the text alludes to liaisons and not marriages per se. The conceptualization of mulattas as beings capable of arousing passion because they are baring themselves and are more independent continues well into the twentieth century. More importantly, the text emphasizes the concern that the rich, white families felt for the preservation of white bloodlines and for a Caucasian look, which was so important in belonging to an American elite.

In *The House*, the characters are very much torn by this issue as they struggle and cope with racial discrimination in various ways. Overall, the patriotic quest to define what it is to be Puerto Rican is pinned by Isabel on the figure of the *jíbaro*. He (and it is frequently a he) is usually represented as a poor, light-skinned inhabitant of the

mountains who has adopted some of the African ways of life in terms of language and food. At the same time, he is a survivor, and as such, he is exalted. Literary critic María Teresa Babín, in "The *Jíbaro*: Symbol and Synthesis," explains that the image of the *jíbaro* "became the inspiration for an optimistic search of the essence of Puerto Rican culture" (433). In *Panorama de la cultura puertorriqueña*, she clarifies that "Es proverbial considerar al jíbaro el habitante blanco por excelencia, descendiente de los pobladores españoles en su mayoría, mientras se juzga que la concentración de los esclavos africanos en las haciendas de caña dio origen al mestizaje frecuente en los pueblos de la costa abiertos al mar. En el presente [1958] es difícil precisar estas zonas étnicas" (123). However, she is quick to point out that although the notion of *mestizaje* is accepted, "se arguye con cierta propensión vicaria que Puerto Rico es una isla donde el mestizaje tiende al predominio del blanco, proclamándose que nuestro pueblo es uno de los 'más blancos' de América" (128). Isabel's family descends from the coffee growers of the mountains. Her narrative perpetrates accepted perceptions and serves to oppose her family to the coastal *nouveaux riches* exemplified by the Mendizábal side. For example, when she speaks of her cousin Margarita's skin color, Isabel explains that her "skin wasn't white. It was more the color of sandalwood, as is often the case with the people from the mountains" (306). By synthesizing the African elements into this one romantic and melancholy figure, there is an erasure of African elements and a "whitening" of them. The professional and intellectual elite of the '50s through the '80s seems to have won the racial battle by way of acculturation to the Spanish heritage.

For the elites, this is a crucial win because, as Thomas B. Mathews argues in a 1974 article, the United States had imported its racism to the island. And when "supposedly liberal government officials came into contact with the Puerto Ricans, [there was] the same general tendency to classify the Puerto Ricans as an inferior breed" (307). Puerto Rican anthropologist Arlene Torres, in "La gran familia puertorriqueña 'ej prieta de beldá' (The Great Puerto Rican Family is Really Really Black)," demythifies the official notion that an unprejudiced "gran familia puertorriqueña" exists. This political ideology "promotes processes of social integration; however, there is still a hyper-privileging of individuals of European descent with phenotypic features associated with 'whiteness'" (286). Puerto Rico evolves into a nation in which the concept of *mestizaje/mulataje* is acceptable as long as "the essence of Puerto Rican society and culture is still rooted in Spain and later in the Americas" (Torres 287), a geography that excludes Africa. Puerto Ricans tend to acknowledge their African roots only within the popular culture context. As a consequence, the romantic figure of the *jíbaro*, descending from the mountain where the Spanish legacy was best preserved, represents Puerto Ricans in the collective imaginary.

Ferré's works have often dealt with the sugar barons and their descendants. In *The House on the Lagoon*, she looks at the merchant bourgeoisie class, which rises to the top after 1917 thanks to its import/export business dealings. This same bourgeoisie wants to be accepted by the old and ruined sugarocracy and like it will strive to preserve the whiteness the old sugar cane barons prized so much. To be successful, these new rich must whiten themselves as much as possible and preserve their claim to a "clean" bloodline. The novel is literally constructed on the foundations of the three houses of the Mendizábal family and the intertwined stories of those who interact with them. The novel/house grows as the family's three houses are built, deconstructed, and reconstructed through time, inevitably paralleling the nation's history and how it developed and grew within world events.

The "white" family that Isabel examines is marked by the, at times, forced interactions among the island's various racial, social, and class groups. Eventually, by legal marriage or by rape, the races come together. The Mendizábal blood is forever mixed with that of the Avilés lineage. On the genealogical chart proposed by the author before we even begin to read the novel, the Buenaventura bloodline runs parallel to that of the Avilés matriarchal family, and finally the two intersect through Carmelina's rape. The patriarch of the black family, Bernabé Avilés, is a "*negro bozal*"; the epithet carries the meaning that he was born in Africa and brought as a slave to the island. He speaks a Bantu language and organizes a slave revolt that fails. Instead of being executed, he is brought to the plaza and

> all of a sudden Bernabé saw Pietri, the town barber, carrying his black instrument case and flanked by two Spanish soldiers in uniform. An aide walked by his side, holding a red-hot iron rod. Bernabé realized what was going to happen and strained desperately at his bindings, moving his head up and down like a strapped bull. When the barber opened his bag and took out his scalpel, Bernabé let out such a howl that the governor dropped his coffee cup on his lap ... "Olorún, ka kó koi bé!: Bernabé cried, looking straight up into the sun as he prayed to his gods to be merciful. One of the soldiers hit him in the head with a club and he passed out. The barber then pried his mouth open with a wooden spoon and sliced his tongue off, cauterizing the wound with the red-hot iron. (62)

The scene is symbolic of the silencing of the blacks trying to rebel against their fate. Petra, his granddaughter, is the cook and maid of the Mendizábal family. She and her family live in the cellar of the house on the lagoon, close to the mangrove and the land crabs that crawl around and about. As a medicine woman from Guayama, as well as a transmitter of Afro-Puerto Rican traditions, she cooks a combination of Spanish dishes and the inherited fare of the African slaves. Her devotion is to Elegguá, her favorite saint—an important figure who will eventually save the manuscript we are reading. However, most of the time she remains silent, in the background of the house and the plot of the manuscript.

Another character and her descendants of color are not present on that genealogy page of the Mendizábals and the Avilés: Doña Ermelinda Quiñones, a mulatta and famous dressmaker from Ponce. After defending her for protesting over the dire pay of needleworkers, the white lawyer Don Bolívar Márquez makes her his mistress. In spite of this twist from fate, she remains a triply dangerous character because she is 1) a woman, 2) a mulatta, and 3) an outspoken advocate for the creation of unions to protect the needleworkers, all women and of mostly poor and mixed origins. A smart woman, whose spirit was somewhat broken after her jail arrest, she reincarnates in the courageous nature of her two granddaughters, Coral and Perla Ustariz. In the novel, Ermelinda is described as "very good looking—tall and willowy, with fine features. Her eyes were the color of molasses and her skin was a light cinnamon. Her only drawback was the mat of corkscrew curls that grew on top of her head, so wild and thick and spirited there was no way to comb them into a civilized hairdo. For this reason, ever since she turned fifteen, Ermelinda wore a red turban tied around her head" (219). The key word is "drawback," signifying that to be deprived of straight hair is a curse to any woman, and that she better not dare to

mingle with the "white," well-to-do Puerto Rican society, where she could have perhaps otherwise pass as white. The use of the term "drawback" also signals the underlying prejudices that Isabel covertly espouses.

At first, Ignacio, Quintín's brother, courts Esmeralda, her daughter, but the Mendizábal clan forbids the interaction. Because Ignacio commits suicide, the color lines are not crossed, and the family can maintain its "official" purity of blood. The omission of the Quiñones genealogy represents another erasure of Afro-Caribbean women, because although they do not marry into the Mendizábal family, Ermelinda's descendants are courted by two generations of Mendizábal men.

The racial prejudice against the Quiñones women crops up again when Manuel, one of Isabel and Quintín's sons, wants to marry Coral, a redhead with light gold skin. Willie (Isabel and Quintín's adopted son) dates her sister, Perla. Quintín's racism clearly comes out in the open when Manuel asks him for his permission and his blessing to marry Coral. After making an incision on the tip of one of his fingers and letting blood out, he explains:

> "You see this blood, Manuel?" Quintín said. "It doesn't have a drop of Arab, Jewish, or black blood in it. Thousands of people have died for it to stay that way. We fought the Moors, and in 1492 we expelled them from Spain, together with the Jews. When our ancestors came to this island, special books were set up to keep track of white marriages. They were called the Bloodline Books and were jealously guarded by the Church. Esmeralda's marriage to Ernesto Ustariz doesn't appear in any of them, because she's part black. That's why Isabel shouldn't have taken you to Esmeralda's house when you were a child. And *that's* why you can't marry Coral." (346)

The "pure" white Mendizábal bloodline cannot be officially or legally tainted.

On the other hand, out-of-wedlock relationships with other races are violently highlighted by Ferré through Petra's great-granddaughter, Carmelina, the offspring of a rape committed by a black sailor. In a recurring situation in Caribbean literature, which speaks of an everyday reality, her mother drops her on Petra's lap, who raises her. This "black as ebony" (243) baby is given to the daughters of the house as a new doll/toy. A week later, one of them says: "'I'm tired of playing with a black doll. Let's paint Carmelina white, to see how she looks.' ... Once the job was done, the girls took Carmelina to the bathroom, so she could see how she looked. When Carmelina saw the little white ghost staring back at her in the mirror, she let out a terrified wail..."(245). The scene is emblematic of the erasure we have been discussing: when models of whiteness are forced and imposed on a black page/skin, only pain ensues. Like her ancestor, Bernabé, she lets out a primordial scream, but it is unintelligible to those causing her suffering. As she grows older, she becomes aware of the limitations imposed by the island's white elite; she hopes to find more opportunities in New York City, where she could "become a black fashion model for *Ebony* or *Jet*" (308).

Quintín shatters those dreams when he rapes and impregnates her. Willie, the child born of that violent encounter, is adopted by Quintín and Isabel (after she realizes the truth) and raised as their own mulatto baby. Petra knows that in Puerto Rico, a boy with buckwheat honey-colored skin and gray-green eyes raised by the Mendizábals could have a chance of making it in San Juan's upper-class circles. However, he needs both the financial backing of the name as well as help from the ancestral African gods.

These figures are brought to the foreground by Isabel, a white upper-class educated woman who is trying to revive her family's history along with Puerto Rican history, and there is no denying that the racial and gender issues constitute important elements. For the most part, the black characters remain in the background or the cellar; their mulatto descendants are no longer exclusively nannies, but mostly professionals (journalist, social worker, painter) who because of their education and money have begun to cross the color line. In the eyes of some old, entrenched racists, for example Quintín, they are blacks or descendants of blacks, and there is not much else to discuss. A man of his stature and race may satisfy his sexual urges with them—he sees these women only as objects—but never legalize such a union. Crossing the color line is a clandestine and quiet or private activity and should not be recorded for posterity, not even in fiction, as Isabel does. According to Quintín, Isabel is "tainting" family history as well as Puerto Rican history "*with feminist prejudices*" (108).[1] Her views on his family's racial prejudices are just as damning. As for Isabel, she tries to walk the fine color line, yet her racial and gender prejudices do come through. It will be up to the next generation, Willie and Manuel, to effect changes—one through the arts and the other through armed conflict. As we shall see, similar phenomena related to race and gender appear in Nolla's novel.

Olga Nolla's novel, *El manuscrito de Miramar*, takes us into the year 2025 and into the life of a professional woman, María Isabel a medical doctor in the U.S., who is trying to reconstruct her mother's life (Sonia) as well as that of her island based on a manuscript found in their demolished childhood house years after her mother's death. Sonia had decided to write the story of her affair with her University of Puerto Rico Caribbean History Professor, Don Enrique Suárez Castillo. His knowledge and his nationalist inclinations had swayed her. The novel, once again, is an attempt to reconstruct Puerto Rican history as seen through gendered lenses. The author incorporates a chapter in the voice of the family's black nanny, and some of the same stereotypes seen in Ferré are reinforced.

First of all, the chapter (#13 out of 16) comes toward the end of the novel. The character is only presented as Toñita (a diminutive nickname with no last name and not even the "doña" which is reserved for Sonia). In great awe of this family, she feels compelled to attend doña Sonia's funeral upon reading the obituary in the local papers. In other words, even though she served the family faithfully for many years, no one remembers to contact her. At the beginning of the novel she is a background presence, taking care of the children so that the white, upper-class woman can attend classes at the university and also indulge in having a torrid love affair. Then, Toñita is excised from the text, until she reappears at the funeral.

In that chapter, the reader learns why Toñita disappears. Her narrative explains that upon finding out that she was pregnant and unmarried, doña Sonia condescendingly asks her if she knows who the father is and if they were planning on getting married. Toñita will be allowed to work for the family until the end of t he month. In this instance we recall Williams's analysis of how the black woman is represented as promiscuous and careless with her sexuality. Ironically, the questioning comes from Sonia, a married woman who studies biology, uses contraceptive methods, yet has had an extramarital affair, has gotten pregnant, and does not know who the father is. As an upper-class, white woman with economic means and contacts, she eventually undergoes an abortion, and then goes on a romantic trip to Italy to forget the traumatic experience and turn a new leaf.

Sonia insists on meeting Toñita's future husband and grills him with questions.

Sonia does not ask what Toñita wants or needs. For Toñita, an abortion is not an option. Sonia's prejudicial attitude is very marked: out-of-wedlock sexual relations among people of color cannot be condoned. That sexuality must be curtailed because it is dangerous and could bring the demise of fine Puerto Rican society as doña Sonia knows it. The harshness of the text decries a racial and class gap that does not allow female solidarity to bridge it. When addressing both Toñita and Juanito (also a diminutive and no last name), Sonia dictates their future:

> . . . doña Sonia no se anduvo con rodeos.
> —Mire, Juanito, ¿sabía Ud. que Toñita espera un hijo suyo? . . .
> Doña Sonia lo felicitó por ser un hombre responsable y nos preguntó
> que cuándo era la boda. (166)

Sonia silences Toñita and imposes public and accepted white, bourgeois values upon her children's *nana*, while in her own private circle, these values are but a façade. Nonetheless, Toñita feels she owes the *señora* a big debt and comes to the funeral, even though "una pobre prieta como yo parece una cucaracha en baile de gallinas" (166). When speaking of doña Sonia's children, María Isabel and Antonio, she refers to them as "mis dos niños blancos" (167). As mentioned earlier, don Felipe (Sonia's husband) does not really recognize her: she had merely been one of the many hard-working shadows in his household. Servants had their living quarters above the garage, separate from the rest of the house (*juntos pero no revueltos*). However, Toñita is quick to point out that at least one of her daughters (we assume mulatta) has fared differently: "Pero mis hijas están bien; una de ellas estudió enfermería y trabaja en el hospital Regional de Carolina; es la que todavía vive conmigo" (169). Ironically, she is a nurse, whereas María Isabel is a doctor (class and race have certainly played a role in their respective fates). Toñita's daughters have been limited by their economic means, which in turn have been affected by the color of their skin and their social class.

Toñita, like Petra portrayed as a preserver of Puerto Rican culture, is the one who directly asks Antonio, who lives in the U.S., "¿por qué no vuelves a vivir acá?" (173); to which he answers that he has grown used to living in the United States, and earns more money there. The question is, had he been a dark-skinned Puerto Rican of the lower economic class, would he have done so well in America? Toñita finds him "guapísimo" (173), probably because he is white. From this comment, the reader infers that her notion of beauty has also been molded by that of the economically dominant "white" culture. Yet in her own modest way, Toñita is the only one who realizes that if Puerto Ricans move out of the island, culture and what it means to be Puerto Rican could be lost. Nolla's ironic narrative *clin d'oeil* becomes evident in the names chosen for these two diametrically opposed characters: one, a white, well-to-do male; the other, a black, lower-class woman. Antonio's chapter follows Toñita's—hers serves as the foundation for his. Throughout the novel, he preserves his entire name that happens to be the same as Toñita's (Antonia), but in the masculine version. In an oblique way, he renders tribute to Toñita's African ancestry as he recalls the beauty, strength, and sweetness of the wife of the President of Nigeria and is reminded of his *nana*. But he undermines the tribute when he adds "Me recordó a Toñita, *eso creo*" [(186) my emphasis], and the only actions he immediately remembers her by are that she bathed and dressed him.

This short chapter in *El manuscrito* is an effort at giving a voice to a black woman, a character who does not get many opportunities to express herself. Her character

has adopted the upper white classes' worldview and does not question it. In many instances, she is representative of a group who acknowledges being different, yet has not figured out that these differences are important and integral parts of Puerto Rican culture. More importantly, it allows us to examine the pivotal yet forgotten role that the *nanas negras* have played throughout our history: as some of the humblest and most exploited members of our society, they have provided the basic care of many well-to-do white children. They have often been the first tangible contact with a part of Puerto Rican culture (i.e., Afro-Caribbean) that the younger generation of upper-class whites may not have otherwise received.

In these two novels, the mulatta descendants of the *nanas negras* have slowly begun to make their mark by participating more fully in many facets of Puerto Rican life, especially at the professional level. Besides, the daughters and granddaughters of the *nanas negras* have a firm footing in the house's foundation while slowly but surely climbing the convoluted stairs that lead to other parts of the nation/house that constitute Puerto Rico. These floors, or the stairs leading to them, are not always easy to discern because of our history of silencing the offspring of miscegenation. Rosario Ferré and Olga Nolla have dared to tackle such a complex issue in their novels. Their writing protagonists all write from the inside of houses that keep being modified as their writings are also transformed by events surrounding them. The scaffolding supporting the nation/house/novels is built around issues of gender and race. While the white, well-to-do female writers can tell and fashion their own stories, the same is not entirely true of the Afro-Caribbean women in the texts. Their stories are still being written by others, and even when they have a voice (as in Toñita's case), they are told how to act. The Afro-Caribbean markers are still associated with popular culture—in Petra's case, through food and beliefs; in Toñita's case, through a brief glimpse at her language [e.g., "estoy preñá" (165)]. The *nanas negras* are still in separate quarters that are different from those of the white protagonists who consider those spaces as distinct and separate.

While fending off *machista* views on gender issues, the novelists deal with ingrained racial issues. Even though these are not resolved, there is an attempt to address them and bring them to the forefront through gendered lenses. Afro-Caribbean women, in spite of all of the maginalizations, are present in the novels in entire segments through the prism, of course, of their white *métrices en scène*. Their voices are not completely lost because the reader is not entirely focused on the voluptuousness of their bodies or the sensuality they exude while "walking in a certain kind of way." By writing them into the texts, the authors address some of the erasure and the silencing to which Afro-Caribbean women have been subject for so long in a house/nation also built through their efforts.

NOTES

1 In Ferre's novel, Isabel's comments and not her manuscript are presented in italics. In Nolla, Sonia's manuscript is in italics within María Isabel's text.

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