

POETIC INVENTION AGAINST THE BLACK BODY:  
"RETRATA UN GALÁN A UNA MULATA, SU DAMA"  
BY SALVADOR JACINTO POLO DE MEDINA

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In 1634, a twenty-three year old poet from Murcia, Salvador Jacinto Polo de Medina, published a collection of burlesque poems entitled *El buen humor de las musas*.<sup>1</sup> He was following the tradition of so many young priests-to-be, who indulged in secular poetry at the risk of losing a certain amount of decorum, as the Canon of Toledo confessed with some embarrassment to Don Quijote. But this is a particularly noteworthy case, since the book contains a prologue by Francisco de Cascales, the influential author of the *Cartas Philologicas*, and Polo de Medina's literary mentor. Also, the permit for publication was signed by none other than Lope de Vega. This book of humorous verse, then, had been blessed by some of the most distinguished arbiters of literary taste at the time: a theorist and the most famous man of letters at the time.

Of all the ridiculous types and characters in the collection, I have selected the type of a Mulata portrayed in the longest poem included in the book, "Retrata un galán a una mulata, su dama."<sup>2</sup> Polo de Medina wrote in this long composition the burlesque praise of an impossible beauty. Throughout the poem, the central motif is the contrast between the model of ideal feminine beauty and the anti-ideal of a Mulata. This is not a typical poem in the vein of the praise of the dark lady, practiced by Camoens, Ronsard, or Shakespeare. These poets praised their beloved women *in spite* of the difficulties posed by the phenotype of their poetic object. The portrait of the dark lady is successful in spite of public censure, because these poets elevated desire to the category of a universal norm of beauty.

The representation of Blacks in Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had almost one single theme, centered around the issue of skin color and other physical traits that created the external signs of their identity as a marginalized group. In por-

traying Blacks, Spanish Golden Age literature used the figure of *synecdoche*—the body—over any other consideration, whether social, political, or spiritual. The literary economy of the Petrarchan canon, therefore, was markedly at odds with any possibility of equating a Black woman to its aristocratic ideal of universal beauty and source of legitimate poetic inspiration.

Polo de Medina was from Murcia, a region particularly torn by racial and ethnic conflicts since the beginning of the seventeenth century. As a baroque poet, Polo de Medina discusses the Petrarchan literary practice in a mocking way. Straying from the established poetic path carries with it a crisis in creative power and Polo de Medina seems to be most amused by it. What the poet sees in front of him is depressing enough. His *Mulata's* neck is not white. The wind neither moves, nor spreads, nor even uncombs her hair in rapid flight. That same hair does not come from any sort of gold vein either. The poet's metaphoric force seems to have no easy object. In vain the poet searches in the "*Calepino*," the Latin dictionary, for an appropriate poetic name for his beloved but "no me he encontrado en el volumen suyo / nombre que venga con el nombre tuyo." This lack of authoritative poetic name is a serious handicap: "en el alma me pesa / que te llares Teresa." The lady of this poem is a namesake of Sancho Panza's wife.

Lisa Rabin, in her recent study of the Petrarchan blazon in relation to the episode of the enchanted *Dulcinea* in *Don Quijote* (II:10), argues that the Petrarchan model of love and language is the companion for heroic deeds and imperial adventure. The Petrarchan lover finds it difficult to appropriately describe the "parts" of his beloved's, who remains indecipherable and remote. The beloved privacy becomes her authority (Rabin 89). However, the *Mulata* in Polo de Medina's burlesque praise is the antithesis of inspiration for imperial adventures of love and conquest. She lacks authority to be a lady and, furthermore, her body will be revealed to the public in full physical detail.

The poem belongs to the baroque fashion of the antiblazon, the negation of the Petrarchan model of constructing feminine beauty by praising each part of the woman's face: hair, eyes, lips, teeth, neck, etc. The use of the antiblazon as model for parody was a rather tired poetic exercise in the 1630s. In this case, however, the poet has chosen for his parody of the Petrarchan blazon a type of

woman who belongs to a racial group marked socially as an anti-model of humanity itself. The poet has decided to portray something distinctively different, using a model that he knows unsuitable:

Comienço a lo vsual por los cabellos  
 que son del mismo Sol los rayos bellos  
 mas no vienen tps hebras con sus rayos  
 porque ellas son morcillas, y ellos vayos  
 y si digo que son madejas de oro,  
 a mi, y a su beldad, pierdo el decoro,  
 pues aura quien me tache  
 de que vendo por oro el azabache. (60r)

As the poem progresses, two issues stand out in its construction. The first one is the discussion of the womanness or femaleness of a *Mulata*. In the poetic language of the time, the issue is whether a *mulata* is a true lady. There is a syntactic pause, a juxtaposition of noun phrases—*a una mulata / su dama*. These two concepts are contiguous, yet in opposition. They do not belong in the same unit. The second issue brought up in this poem is the dilemma between chaste love and lascivious desire underlying the representation of this *Mulata*.

The title of the poem, “Retrata un galán a una mulata, su dama” already suggests a contradiction between *dama* and *mulata*. The poem undoes any attempt to equate a *Mulata* with an authentic lady. A “*Mulata*,” we are being told in jest, is not a legitimate subject for an amorous poetic composition. This means that a *Mulata* does not represent the ideal human female, “woman.” This also indicates a certain fuzziness in gender categories. The lover-poet makes clear that the distinction between men and women is not as simple and evident as it may seem at first sight. There are different kinds of men—gentlemen and plebeians—as well as several kinds of women—ladies and the others. The woman sung in this poem is not defined so much by her sex as by her race. Race makes this *Mulata* problematic because it questions her legitimacy as an object of feminine representation. A *Mulata* is problematic as a woman. Paraphrasing the famous question posed by the nineteenth-century American abolitionist Sojourner Truth—Ain’t I a woman?—, we could ask ourselves the question: is a *Mulata* a woman? Similar

questions were implied by Juan Ruiz in the *Libro de Buen Amor* about the *serrana* of La Tablada (1010-1021), or by the idle reader in the case of the unfeminine and unladylike Aldonza Lorenzo. Our poet states:

Dexo la barba, y cuello,  
 braços, manos y pecho hermoso, y bello  
 (del bello que lo tapa),  
 que a tu morena piel es felpa, y capa,  
 porque no piense, y crea,  
 quando estos versos lea,  
 el malicioso, y rudo,  
 que voy adereçando algun menudo. (64v)

As in the case of Juan Ruiz's *serranas*, this Teresa is a bad choice for sexual desire. Physically, she appears to have masculine traits, which at some point are indistinguishable from her racial characteristics. Her mouth is described in anatomical detail: eight regular teeth, four fangs, twenty molars . . . to bite, and chew food, spit saliva, and so on. A far cry from the box of pearls that Petrarchan mouths were supposed to be. They underline the corporeality of the muse, her being part of the world of the flesh, not of that of the spirit:

Tus labios son dos labios solamente  
 y vna tu boca, o puente  
 del pan, del agua, de la voz, y aliento,  
 sonoro instrumento  
 cuya color impressa  
 es madroño una vez, otra camuesa,  
 segun los bruñe, y pinta  
 el sangriento Brasil resuelto en tinta. (64r)

It is not so much what these women *do* that renders them unladylike—which is translated as unfeminine—but *who* they are, that is, their social affiliation.

In this context, one important contribution made by recent feminist philosophy is that of matter. It deals with the distinction between gender and sexual difference. If we talk about men and women, it is due not so much to our constant awareness of biologi-

cal differences between sexes as to a question of social categories. All social categories have a history and a set of concrete consequences for the individual human beings ascribed to them. Unlike having a long or a short nose, to have or not to have a penis constitutes a social difference, as well as a biological one. In seventeenth-century Spain, to have dark skin was constitutive of a social mark of difference. Society barred Black people from access to guilds, religious confraternities, the army, the church, or the convent of nuns. To be Black—and to be dubbed *mulato/a* meant that one was considered to be Black—was an evident social disadvantage in Golden Age Spain. Slavery was something more than the misfortune alluded to in the *Siete Partidas*, where it was defined not as a natural institution, but as a social one. The practice of slavery impressed on its victims and their descendants a stigma that was intimately connected to their skin color.<sup>3</sup> To be Black was synonymous with being a slave.<sup>4</sup> To be a *mulato* was the same, along with the whiff of illegitimacy added to it, the result of the sexual union of two races in confrontation with each other.

Gender, in the case of this Mulata, is defined in accordance with a *sexual technology*, to use Michel Foucault's concept, that excludes her as a means of transmitting life to desirable human beings, i.e., whites.<sup>5</sup> Petrarchist poetry of the Renaissance and the Baroque was part of that sexual technology. A Mulata is excluded from the ideal feminine gender. To this concept of technology of sex it is necessary also to add the concept of *technology of gender*, as discussed by Teresa de Lauretis: techniques and discourses that construct the category of gender in a society (Lauretis 38). Every woman is seen as a representation—good or bad—of the aesthetic, racial, and social ideal of each time and place. Every woman represents—better or worse—her role as a member of the feminine gender. The protagonist of Polo de Medina's burlesque antiblazon is a bad representative of the female gender because she cannot perform her role according to the ideal. Therefore, the poem is an explanation of how unwomanly this woman is.

In her analysis of portrait theory in the Renaissance, Elizabeth Cropper notes how theorists like Alberti considered the ideal of feminine beauty as synonymous with Nature itself. For painters as well as for poets, the challenge was to portray beauty in a woman, more than to depict a beautiful woman. Portraits of women were

idealized, such as the case of Titian's Isabella d'Este. Titian painted this Italian aristocrat as a young woman, when the fact was that at the time of the composition (1534) Isabella d'Este was sixty years old. A similar esthetic principle rules the portraits of heads of state in coins and postage stamps today. For instance, the busts of Spain's Queen Sofía and Britain's Queen Elizabeth always appear much younger and taut than their fleshy originals. Polo de Medina does the same with his *Mulata*, but in reverse. She is the anti-ideal:

De tus rojas, y candidas mexillas  
 dixera marauillas,  
 llamaralas auroras,  
 mas no estan de una suerte a todas horas  
 que si en la madrugada  
 sale la Aurora blanca y encarnada,  
 tus mexillas descubren  
 el euano que encubren  
 porque en ellas el euano es postizo,  
 y la grana, y el jazmin prestado hechizo . . . (62v)

Este es, ingrata Ninfa, tu traslado,  
 sacado, corregido y concertado  
 con el original de tu persona,  
 las faltas me perdona,  
 que por ellas remito  
 al viuo original todo lo escrito. (64v)

A *Mulata* is a different sexual persona from a lady. A lady may lead the poetic suitor to matrimony. Even if she is inaccessible, that is, seen as the suitor's defect, not the lady's. But the *Mulata* is not marriageable because of a defect. Her defect is her socially inferior race. In her use of make-up and other beauty products, the poet sees only an attempt to hide the hideous truth of her blackness and her ugliness. Her attempts to imitate the ideal beauty of the aristocratic white lady are seen as an exercise of mendacity:

Son tus mexillas dos neuados pomos  
 que algunos llaman romos  
 cuyo color burillo  
 quiere matrimoniar con lo amarillo  
 y para disfraçar tu taracea

de contraria librea  
 viste tu mano franca  
 su negro bombasi de tela blanca. (63r)

True beauty is owned by individuals like Isabella d'Este, even if her portrait at the hands of Titian contains strong doses of idealization. The Mulata's attempt at self-idealization by means of self-representation with the use of "pelo, soliman, trama, albayalde" is seen as illegitimate, as a simulacrum. The poet denounces her self-representation as anti-natural and morally reprehensible:

quedando el rostro vfano y hueco  
 con tu mismo embeleco  
 de ver quando al cristal su imagen miras  
 cubierta vna verdad con dos mentiras. (63r-63v)

The Mulata of this poem is extremely problematic as a subject of representation. The poet does not seem to be able to find any metaphors that may depict her as a near-ideal of Nature. Therefore, one must conclude that a Mulata is a defect of Nature. How should the poet, then, explain his feelings of love for her? It is quite clear that this less than ideal lady is capable of awakening desire in her male lover, who is typically anguished and complains of her dourness and ingratitude. There is a contradiction between the ideal and desire in this poem. The unobtainable woman of this poem is not separated from the male lover by marriage or unreachable social status. She denies him what she offers liberally to others:

escupes, y en mil modos  
 pides sagaz a todos,  
 y alegre si pronuncias  
 si te promete alguno el bien que anuncias  
 y rebelde, sin gusto, y con despego  
 me respondes vn no, quando te ruego. (64r-64v)

During the Golden Age, the Mulata in Spain represented an object of desire both socially prohibited yet practically accessible to those with means and power. The *mulata* was a fantasy of liminality: a being between the world of culture—the Petrarchan ideal of Woman—and the savage and formless nature that acts as mental

site for the sexual desire of males. This Mulata is a *monster* of a woman. She is in line with the savage men of pastoral novels, who represent a lascivious desire for beautiful shepherdeses. The difference, in Polo de Medina's poem, is that the *mulata murciana* represents a kind of desire considered socially absurd. The inadequacy of the desiring subject in the case of the savage men of pastoral novels is transferred now to the desired object. The subject, the white male poet, is let off the hook by mere use of a self-deprecating joke:

Aqui dixera aora  
 que tu galan te adora,  
 mas callo, porque temo  
 castigos de blasfemo,  
 y requiebros que huelen a gentiles,  
 son de amorés plebeyos y ciuiles,  
 y yo (auñque poco valgo)  
 te estimo y quiero con amor hidalgo. (59r-59v)

The seventeenth century constructed male heterosexual desire in a compartmentalized manner. One "must" desire a high class woman. All women of this class are beautiful by definition, as exemplified by María de Zayas in any of her *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* from the same period. This official sanction of beauty and desirability renders the description of the monstrous body of a Mulata as an open door that leads towards a kind of knowledge that has been negated, and therefore prohibited. Any poetry that declares a Mulata as the object of desire runs the risk of being either obscene, or illicit. Only the joke can make it acceptable:

Leche, cielo, cristal y nieue ardiente  
 dixera que es tu frente;  
 mas no aura quien lo crea  
 cuando en tu frente vea  
 aquesta tez bastarda,  
 poco menos que negra y más que parda:  
 y porque algún curioso si te mira,  
 no me halle en mentira,  
 digo que es tu color leche entintada  
 olin nevado y nieue azauachada, (60v)



As in Luis de Góngora's "monstruous" poetry—"o púrpura nevada o nieve roja"—the oxymoron is the only rhetorical figure capable of summarizing the picture of the "monstruous" truth—a white man confessing that he *loves* a Mulata. To amplify the theme of monstrosity, the poem itself is a monster. Its length—over 300 lines—is totally excessive and at odds with the *brevitas* of the Petrarchan sonnet, for instance.

In her essay on sixteenth-century European attitudes towards the phenomenon of monstrosity, Ottavia Niccoli observes that an important change occurred in that period due to the discovery of new lands and new peoples. Prior to the age of European discoveries, only the most fantastic accounts existed mixed with a certain vagueness about the real existence of those peoples, animals, plants and minerals considered by medieval writers like John of Mandeville as "marvels." From *marvel* to *monster* there is a step, and a change in European attitudes towards knowledge. Monsters become "real" in the sense that they become the object of empirical knowledge: navigators affirm having seen them with their own eyes. One did not depend on ancient Greek or Roman natural historians any more. "Blacks" thus became part of the *teratologic* catalog, teratology being the science of the monstruous. If a distinction was being made in the European Renaissance between fantastic monsters and real ones, metaphysical implications were still being drawn. Monsters accompanied and heralded disasters and all nature of calamities. Their "desmesura" and "descomedimiento," to use Don Quijote's terms for his favorite enemies, the giants, implied moral unfitness and diabolical connections. In the age of Cervantes, humor was a popular form to dismiss what appeared unshapely because it was different.

Peter Brooks affirms, following Jacques Lacan, that the monster becomes a *symptom*, that is, a metaphor or *signifier* in place of another indecipherable *signifier*: desire. In Polo de Medina's poem, the individual Mulata who has become the object of his derision is a symptom of chaos, of the threat of imminent chaos in a Spanish society—especially Murcia—so preoccupied with lineage and *limpieza de sangre*.<sup>6</sup>

Listening to the monster, observing and contemplating the monster, constitutes a sort of perversion. The slightest contact with the monster, even visual, *taints* the observer/listener with some

aspect of monstrosity. The "galán-poeta" of our poem is somehow dark skinned, as a result of his mock-neoplatonic identification with his dark beloved. He is polluted by the Mulata's monstrosity, and he wants his audience to know of his defect:

Digo pues, que me abraso, y me consumo  
 pues me sale del alma al rostro el humo  
 y mi cara morena  
 es claro indicio, que en tu fuego pena. (59r)

Both lover and object of love become "denaturalized" in the poem. Implicit in this assertion is a current joke in the seventeenth century about being *moreno* or *mulato*, with the meaning of being accused of sodomy, as it is present in some of Francisco de Quevedo's burlesque poems.<sup>7</sup> The normal conclusion one should derive from this account is that such a woman would make a natural man (a white one) look like a monster, because the relation is monstrous and "dehumanizing."<sup>8</sup>

Abdul R. JanMohamed's concept of "racialized sexuality" comes to mind when analyzing sexual relations among people of different races (96). In our societies, sexuality is based in juridical prohibitions accompanied by powerful discourses of illegitimization. The existence of slavery, or segregation and miscegenation laws in the United States and South Africa until not so long ago are but two examples. Once prohibited and morally condemned, sexuality between members of different races becomes racialized. Racialized sexuality provokes a double world of official truth and the truth known by all but silenced. Sex between the two separate races is officially denied any status of legality, and it is even declared as not existing at all. In Western societies, the white and black races are defined as two separate groups that do not share *kinship*. They are not related. Every heterosexual interracial contact is a threat to that prohibition against creating kinship ties. Mulatto children are thus a social affront. With their presence they demonstrate that, if not socially and legally, the two opposing races are biologically related, and thus their existence as "races" negated. For instance, in Cirilo Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés*, Doña Rosa, Leonardo Gamboa's mother, cannot accept becoming the grandmother of a child begotten between her beloved white son and Cecilia, the light-skinned

illegitimate daughter of her own husband. In Villaverde's novel the contact of the two races not only is a loud secret, but an incestuous one to boot. Silence must be imposed by force—María de Regla, Cecilia's mother, has been shut in a madhouse. To reveal the paternity of a Mulatto child is to instantly give him or her rights and claims of kinship. It is to deny the principle by which the two races claim to live separate existences: lineage and kinship. The Mulatto is a "monster" in a social system that constructs racial purity and separateness as "natural." The binary opposition white/black, which is violent in its practice, like Roland Barthes stated, loses its grip on coherence with the presence of the Mulatto.

In this way, the poem "Retrata un galán a una mulata, su dama," is a denunciation of illegitimate desire, and yet it becomes transgressive in principle. For a white male in seventeenth-century Spain, to reveal a sexual desire for a woman of color is to break a silence imposed by social laws; it is not a desire conducive to marriage. Marrying a mulata would only bring dishonor to a white man. She could become his mistress, but even that would not be considered a "normal" extramarital affair. To equate the beauty of a Mulata to that of the white model is "heresy," or "irony," we are told by this "Murcian" poet: "y yo, como poeta bautizado / no quiero estar por esto excomulgado" (63v). From a position of power, the poet—white, male—shows to the public the Black body they are not supposed to know.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has studied the relation between power and "unknowing" as the capacity to ignore certain issues and even deny their existence. Ignorance and denial are prerogatives of power. Sometimes, power defines ignorance of certain things as something good (for instance, consuming illegal drugs, engaging in illicit sexual acts). Proclaiming the excellence of his (illicit) desire and his beloved would be tantamount to a breach with the orthodox belief that certain things should remain unknown. It would be contrary to the Truth as defined by those holding power. *Not knowing* the Black woman is the natural thing, the orthodoxy.

The poem's strategy of ridiculing a (white) male's desire for a Mulata serves as a negative argument for what is considered desirable. By presenting the Mulata as worthy of scorn, marginal, and a kind of sexual deviation, a norm of sexual orthodoxy is proclaimed:

sexuality between two individuals of opposite sexes but the same social upper class, *cristiano viejo* caste, and white race. To love a Mulata is a monstrosity, and the poem is an exercise in the illegitimation of the erotic desire towards her. The insisting and monotonous couplets that are the poem's chosen metric form, the choice of ridiculous metaphors that parody the concepts of Petrarchan white beauty, and the excessive length of the poem, all constitute instruments to disqualify this woman and this desire.

In the case of this Mulata, the categories of gender, sexuality, and race intertwine in a destructive manner. The three categories are inseparable in the way they "paint" the "truth" of this woman. If the Petrarchist poet wanted to portray the internal beauty underlying the beloved lady, the poetic "I" of Salvador Polo de Medina succeeds in portraying the social attitudes of his time towards marginalized ethnic groups.

The fate of the Black body in Hispanic literatures has been one of invisibility, to use the fertile metaphor coined by Ralph Ellison. When the Black body becomes visible, that fact alone provokes a catastrophe, like the intrusion of an enemy. The Black body is the enemy of choice among mystics, like Saint John of the Cross or Saint Teresa of Avila, who represented the sinful soul as of "Ethiopian race" and the devil as a "negrillo," a little Black boy.<sup>9</sup> No wonder that the protagonist of Luis Vélez de Guevara's *Virtudes vencen señales* is shaken when, like Narcissus, he contemplates his own Black image in the water; and Lázaro de Tormes's Black baby brother reacts with fear at the sight of his own father, the loving and unhappy Zaide.

In European tradition, the Black body is "marked" by skin color. Such a mark is a most intense metonym that attempts to represent the totality of a human being who has been considered "different" because of that mark. Dark skin color marks the individual sometimes—most times—as inferior, detestable, and even non-human or subhuman. Some other times—and as self-conscious compensation or even reparation—it is a mark of superiority, angelic nature, or romantic tragedy, as in the case of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's *Sab*.<sup>10</sup> They constitute the two sides of the same coin. The Black body has been present in Hispanic literatures since the beginning, and always as a figure of discomfort, controversy and opposition.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In this essay I am using the text of the 1637 edition.

<sup>2</sup>I have chosen the spelling *Mulata*, without double t, and capitalized, to keep with the seventeenth-century English spelling, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. The first occurrence of the word *Mulata* dates from 1622, in Mabbe's English translation of the *Guzmán de Alfarache*. In a note on the margin it says: "Mulata is a maid-childe, that is borne of a Negra, and a fayre man, and so on the contrary."

<sup>3</sup>As an example, the famous playwright Rojas Zorrilla was accused of descending from Jews, Moors and *Mulattoes* when he applied for an *hábito* of the Order of Santiago (Caro Baroja 2: 396).

<sup>4</sup>The interchangeability of the terms *negro* and *esclavo* is evident in works by Lope de Vega such as *El negro del mejor amo*, and in Cervantes' *Novelas ejemplares* ("El celoso extremeño," "El coloquio de los perros") where the word *negro* automatically reduced the character to the social condition of a slave without any further need for explanation.

<sup>5</sup>The concept "technology of sex" appears in his *History of Sexuality* (vol. 1, 116), and although Foucault applies it to the European society of the late eighteenth century, it has its precedent in what he calls "technologies of the flesh," rooted in the religious discourses of the sixteenth century.

<sup>6</sup>The Ricote episode in *Don Quijote* has been connected by critics to the Valley of Ricote in the Kingdom of Murcia. That area contained one of the highest concentrations of Moriscos outside the Kingdom of Granada. In 1614 the order for their expulsion was carried out with chilling efficiency. The valley lost one fourth of its total population in a matter of weeks.

<sup>7</sup>Specifically his poem "A un ermitaño mulato" in which travellers are warned against a Mulatto hermit, who is accused of sodomy, masturbation, and bestiality, in this order. In his famous "Respuesta de la Méndez a Escaramán," we read: "Montusar se ha entrado a puto / con un mulato rapaz / que por lucir más que todos / se deja el pobre quemar."

<sup>8</sup>In another epigram of the same collection, Polo de Medina revisits the theme of the *Mulata*. Now her figure is compared to soot, a typical metaphor and joke in comedia *negros* and *negras*: "Vio a vna mulata Murciana / vn hombre, assomada vn día / a vn esconce, que seruía / de chimenea, y ventana. / Ella se le queixa, viendo / que no la habla, corrida, / por ser tan del conocida / y el se disculpò diciendo: / Que passe, mire, y te vea, / sin hablar, no es mucho, Clara, / que enténdi que era tu cara / humo dessa chimenea."

<sup>9</sup>In his *Declaración* of the meaning of his *Cántico espiritual*, Saint John of the Cross inherits the Patristic tradition of representing human nature, and the human soul, as an Ethiopian, dark and unworthy, but chosen neverthe-

less by God. The text of the *Song of Songs* in which the bride proclaims: "Nigra sum, sed formosa" was reinterpreted by Christian exegetes such as Origen, St. Augustine and others in a clearly racialized way (Courtès 13). St. Teresa confesses in *Las Moradas* that the devil tried to distract her at the beginning of her spiritual journey by appearing in the shape of a most ugly "negrillo."

<sup>10</sup>Published in Spain in 1841, Gómez de Avellaneda's novel was banned in Cuba, where its abolitionist sentiment was considered most unsuitable for the political charged climate of the colony. The romantic protagonist is a man of mixed race, all virtue and endurance, who suffers at the hands of unscrupulous white owners. The critic George Fredrickson has defined this thematic frame as "romantic racialism." Anti-slavery narratives throughout the nineteenth century in Europe and the Americas developed from the idea of the "noble savage" of the earlier century. William Luis has recently studied the extent of this phenomenon in Cuban literature.

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