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Redefining the Image of the Afro-Puerto Rican Woman in Recent Narrative by Mayra Santos-Febres

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REDEFINING THE IMAGE OF THE AFRO-PUERTO RICAN WOMAN IN RECENT NARRATIVE
BY MAYRA SANTOS-FEBRES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
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Abstract

Many 20th century Puerto Rican writers focused on establishing a national identity through their works. Although the island has very diverse culture, some aspects of Puerto Rican identity have been ignored entirely or inaccurately represented in popular and literary culture. In this thesis I use *Nuestra señora de la noche* and *La amante de Gardel* by Mayra Santos-Febres to examine how the writer depicts race and gender based issues in Puerto Rico. With post-colonial theory and otherness theory, I examine how Santos-Febres—a descendant of colonized Puerto Rican people—decolonizes the Afro-Caribbean woman through her writing techniques and reconstructs the image of the Afro-Puerto Rican woman in her texts. Instead of reproducing negative stereotypes, through her characters Santos-Febres creates a new Afro-Puerto Rican woman who exists and thrives outside of the restrictive social “norms.”

Introduction

Europeans have a long history of dominating the world, land and large groups of people; and the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico would not be as diverse if it were not for their pursuit of power. Spanish conquistadors “discovered” the island in 1493 and disrupted life for the indigenous groups inhabiting the island. Because colonization of the Americas as a whole wiped out large portions of indigenous populations with violence and disease, a large portion of the ethnic diversity in the Americas is the result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Slave traders bartered approximately 9.5 million Africans from the 16th century to the 19th century (Rawley 4). Although slavery in Puerto Rico has been studied less than slavery in the United States of America, the forced labor of African people and their descendants helped lay the foundations of the Spanish colony. Since the arrival of these slaves, blackness and African heritage have been a part of Puerto Rican culture, history and identity.

Even though the cruelty of slavery is engrained in the history of all of the colonies in the New World, the conditions of slavery were unique in Puerto Rico. The island did not receive as many slaves as other colonies because it was poorer and had to find other means to support its economy (West-Durán 49). It has been argued that because of the financial situation of the island, Puerto Rican slaves were not treated as expendable objects like Anglo-American slaves (Alleyne 117). Slaves were considered as investments and humans under the eyes of God. The Roman Catholic Church also played a significant part in the treatment of black individuals in all of the Spanish and Portuguese colonies allowing the baptisms and marriages of slaves (Alleyne 118). These circumstances of slavery have had long-lasting effects on race relations in Puerto Rico.

Although slavery in Puerto Rico seemed less harsh than slavery in Anglo-America, it is important to remember that African people were still enslaved and forced to work against their will in dangerous and cruel conditions up until the emancipation of slaves on the island in 1873. The maltreatment of the African slaves in Puerto Rico did not end with slavery; however, scholars in support of Iberian Exceptionalism theory conclude that current race relations on the island—like the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean—differ greatly from race relations in Anglo-America (Alleyne 117). The absence of Jim Crow like laws following the manumission of African slaves and the high rate of intermixing between European men with black slaves and native women, reinforce the idea that Latin American and Caribbean societies were more accepting of individuals of African ancestry. Iberian Exceptionalism suggests that while African-Americans struggled through situations like the Civil Rights Movement, Afro-Latinos were more comfortably adjusting to being citizens of their countries (Peña et al 749). Following this argument, Afro-Puerto Ricans did not experience the same persecution that African-Americans faced in the United States during the 20th century; therefore, Afro-Puerto Ricans, like all Afro-Latinos then and now, are considered to be living in less racist societies than African-Americans.

Although Iberian Exceptionalism promotes the idea that Afro-Puerto Ricans live in more egalitarian societies, Puerto Rican writers such as Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, José Luis González, Rosario Ferré and others have debunked these ideas through literature. In her recent works of narrative *Nuestra señora de la noche* (2006) and *La amante de Gardel* (2015), Mayra Santos-Febres tells stories of Black women's empowerment through protagonists who navigate complex social spheres through a variety of tactics. Linked in various ways to history, these women work within oppressive structures to establish

agency and achieve social mobility. In their very different ways of life, the main characters face oppression unique to the experience of women of color in post-colonial societies. In this thesis, I examine how Santos-Febres uses literary strategies such as narrative voice, detailed descriptions of setting and dialogue between characters to draw attention to the societal perception of Afro-Puerto Rican women and deconstruct these ideas. I also consider how the protagonists confront the long lasting effects of colonization in the unique case of Puerto Rico, which has been called a “post-colonial colony” (Duany 122).

Although Puerto Rico has been heavily influenced culturally and politically by the United States of America since the imperial power took control of the island in 1898 after the Spanish-American War, race is not constructed using Anglo-American standards. Because Puerto Rico is a part of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and was once under Spanish rule, race is constructed in a similar fashion as in the Dominican Republic and in Cuba. The most recent United States Census reported that the majority of Puerto Ricans self-identify as White, alone (Allen 608).¹ Considering that Puerto Rico promotes its racially diverse heritage, Anglo-American racial categories are responsible for the inaccuracy in data. Due to higher rates of miscegenation Spanish-speaking Caribbean has more colloquial terms to identify skin color. A significant percentage of Puerto Ricans identify as a race specific to the island (620). Instead of identifying as Black or White, Puerto Ricans use a variety of terms based on phenotype to refer to race. There exists *blanco*, *negro*, *triqueño*, *indio*, *jabao* and a mixture of these identities (617). Classifications for *castas*, or mixed race people, are

¹ It is important to consider that the United States Census only includes Anglo-American racial categories. It is possible that many Puerto Rican participants self-identified as white because the categories in which they self-identify were not available in the survey.

also specific in Puerto Rico. Individuals who are *mestizo* are of Spanish and indigenous heritage, while individuals of Spanish and African heritage were classified as *mulato* (Lopez 167).

People of European decent, those of African descent and those with Indigenous bloodlines all became recognized Puerto Ricans first, and racial identity is not considered as important as their national identity. Although there were *limpiezas de sangre* in its history, according to some scholars, “race” in the nation of *tres raíces*—taino, Black and Spanish—is based on shared culture, tradition and language, not skin color (Blanco 27).

Although Puerto Rico promotes itself as a nation made up of three races, or roots, the Black component of the *tres raíces* is not always projected in popular culture. People of African descent never made up a large portion of the population. Historically, White has been the racial norm on the island, in a sense that Whiteness is usually equated to Puerto Ricanness in popular culture. “The iconography of Puerto Rico is predominantly white. The images that are presented in the newspapers, on local television and in outdoor advertising are predominantly white, and reflect the racial homogeneity of the ruling classes” (Alleyne 126). When establishing what is Puerto Rican, the standard is White, and when any other group is represented in pop culture, specifically groups of African heritage, these representations have historically reinforced negative stereotypes about this marginalized group. For example, the Black Madonna or the *Virgen de la Monserrate* is a well-known figure in Puerto Rican culture. According to the miracle of Hormigueros, this Virgin saved a White peasant from a wild bull. Although she is iconic, the Black Madonna represents sorcery in Puerto Rican culture, and this reiterates negative stereotypes about people of African heritage (Alleyne 127).

Even though White is the norm for Puerto Rican popular culture, images of Black and Puerto Rican families eventually reached the television screen in the later part of the 20th century. Although the idea of including an Afro-Puerto Rican family on television seemed to be a step in the right direction, their characters reproduced old and negative stereotypes about people of African heritage. In the 1970's on the program *Esto no tiene nombre* producers attempted to recreate the Black activist Angela Davis to criticize issues with the government. In the television program the character complains about everything and instead of being influential or revolutionary like the real Angela Davis, the character becomes a parody on the show (Rivero 114). In the late 20th century there were a few television producers influenced by Black family sitcoms in the United States. *Mi familia* appeared in 1994. This program is particularly unique because it was the first Puerto Rican show that followed the lives of a Black family. Instead of using this show as a platform to address racial issues like black programs in the United States, the show ignored the issues that Black Puerto Ricans faced. It was problematic to refer to the family as an Afro-Puerto Rican family; many wanted to classify them as Puerto Rican. Even with this innovative program, the show only included one Afro-Puerto Rican woman and recreated negative images.

In literary cultural spheres since the 19th century, *criollo*—persons of European ancestry born in Puerto Rico—writers have played an important role in establishing and projecting Puerto Rican “national” identity. In the earlier part of the 20th century Puerto Rican scholars and writers were middle-class and had lighter skin. In establishing this “national” identity much of Puerto Rican literature often excluded a part of the island’s population (Roy-Féquièrre 202). Black Puerto Ricans were frequently ignored in literature

because they were not a part of the “positive” image that this group of scholars and intellectuals wanted to portray. In an effort to maintain this “positive” image and promote a unified “national” identity, early 20th century scholars like Tomás Blanco went as far as attempting to separate the island from its African roots. Blanco acknowledged that Blackness was a part of Puerto Rico’s roots but denied that they, as Puerto Ricans, could be classified as Black (West-Durán 48). Blackness on the island is instead assigned to a specific areas of Puerto Rico, such as San Antón. While this area is “celebrated” for its Blackness, but Puerto Rico in a national context is promoted as mixed, not Black (Godreau 5).

Those writers that attempted to include Afro-Puerto Rican heritage in their works often limited and/or further marginalized Black culture. “Blackness” was made popular in Puerto Rican literature in the work of Luis Palés Matos.² In his work Palés Matos attempts to include and African heritage in the literary discourse of Puerto Rican identity, and this is revolutionary for literature on the island; however, it only recreated old stereotypes. The works of Palés Matos were not left without criticism. Isabelo Zenón Cruz, another key scholar of Puerto Rican racial identity, believed that in his inclusion of “Blackness” in his poetry Palés Matos further separated himself from those of African heritage (Roy-Féquièrre 208).

Other poets from the first half of the 20th century like Carmen María Colón Pellot and Julia de Burgos depicted people of African heritage in their works. Later Puerto Rican writers like Ana Lydia Vega and Rosario Ferré have also given Puerto-Ricans of African

² Luis Palés Matos was not the first Puerto Rican writer to portray Puerto Rican people of African heritage in Puerto Rican literature. Alejandro Tapia y Rivera’s 1867 play *La cuarterona* portrayed Puerto Rican racial politics, but because of censorship, the play was performed in Cuba (West-Durán 51).

descent roles in their literary texts, and their portrayal of Afro-Puerto Rican identity is much less controversial than that of Luis Palés Matos and Colón Pelot.

In examining the representation of Afro-Puerto Rican people, particularly the Afro-Puerto Rican woman, and how these images are recreated, it is necessary to use texts produced by those who identify with this group. Since Mayra Santos-Febres is both Puerto Rican born and of African descent, the author has a more intimate perspective on the Afro-Puerto Rican woman than her non-Black peers. Her work is representative of her own identity. In *Nuestra señora de la noche* and *La amante de Gardel* Santos-Febres portrays two dynamic female protagonists who are physically described in the texts as *negra* not *mulata* or *blanca*. Both novels—which take place in 20th century Puerto Rico—connect their plots to history. The protagonist of *Nuestra señora de la noche* Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer and Carlos Gardel, the love interest of the protagonist of *La amante de Gardel* are actual people. Not only does Santos-Febres recreate the images of real people in her novels, she ties in historic realities in the plot such as prohibition and segregation.

Nuestra señora de la noche follows the life of Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer. Throughout the novel Isabel's circumstances take an important part in the path she chooses to follow. Because she is abandoned as a child, she lives with her godmother until her body becomes too much of a burden for her uncle living with them. During her childhood Isabel works the common jobs of Black women during this time period. She works as a washerwoman and a house maid, and she never really has a place or a real family of her own. After her circumstances force her into homelessness, Isabel finds ways to take control of her life. Ultimately, the thing that saves Isabel and helps her achieve

social mobility is the one thing that has caused her so much turmoil: her body. While working as the domestic help for Fernando Fornarís, Isabel begins a sexual relationship. Even though this young, white attorney eventually marries someone of his own social status, their relationship resulted in a love child and the gifting of land. Conscious of the limited opportunities for women of color to live independently, Isabel decides to open a brothel. She thus creates a safer working environment for those, like herself, that do not have a variety of career opportunities and eventually becomes a very powerful figure in her community.

In *Nuestra señora de la noche* Santos-Febres addresses issues of *othered* individuals and puts emphasis on the association of the Black race with sensuality (Sánchez-Blake 191). According to Helene C. Weldt-Basson, the writer does this by using a white male as the narrative axis for the novel. With this novel she also brings to light the influence that Christianity and African religions has in the Caribbean (Sánchez-Blake 197). According to Ruben Ríos Ávila, with religion Santos-Febres plays with the concept of untraditional virgins through the mothers and godmothers present in the novel (Celis et al 19). Through physical violence in the novel, Santos-Febres recreates violence against marginalized groups in relationships and war (Irizarry 207). She also tackles the subject of female insanity in literature through secondary characters like Cristina Ranger (Weldt-Basson 11).

Micaela Thorné relives her brief love affair with famous singer Carlos Gardel in *La amante de Gardel*. Micaela, like Isabel, is abandoned by her mother and is living with Mano Santa, her grandmother and neighborhood healer. Micaela—who hopes to be a medical professional in her future—studies nursing at a local medical school and is assisting an

American medical doctor, Dr. Marta Roberts, with research. The doctor hopes to get Mano Santa and Micaela to agree to share the secrets of the magical mushroom they use for contraception. Based on the descriptions of her interactions with classmates and faculty of the medical school, Micaela is out of place because she is Black, and this reoccurs in multiple spaces and in multiple situations throughout the novel. In her reflection the young woman recounts using her skills learned as a nursing student and the rituals of her ancestors to “heal” Carlos Gardel’s sexually transmitted illness. The singer invites Micaela to tour Puerto Rico with his band to help nurse him, but their relationship easily transitions from professional to romantic. When it begins to seem as if her professional and sexual relationship is validating Micaela’s existence, she reveals that she, with or without Gardel, is valuable all on her own.

These two novels are not the only texts produced by Santos-Febres that depict a multi-dimensional Afro-Puerto Rican. Santos-Febres addresses blackness, ethnic heritage and oppression of marginalized groups in other works. Through the poetry collection *Anamú y manigua* (1990) she connects herself to her Afro-origins and demonstrates the power of her ancestors (Sánchez-Blake 194). In this work, she also pays homage to activist and women who fought for political and social rights in Puerto Rico (195). Santos-Febres’ narrative works have challenged stereotypes about Afro-Puerto Ricans. For example, the short story “Marina y su olor,” from *Pez de vidrio* (1994) changes stereotypes related to smell into something empowering (West-Durán 65). According to Carolyn Rody in her trans-ethnic, transnational and intergenerational work, Santos-Febres creates Black, feminine characters that have immense power despite their historical trauma (Celis et al 15-16). The writer herself adds a critical perspective to Puerto Rican literature as a whole

by questioning the way in which previous works have reduced people of African heritage to savages, placing emphasis on the exotic and sexual. Through her literature she wants to change the perception of Puerto Rican people of Afro-descent (*Sobre piel y papel* Santos-Febres 154). Her works are situated around the fundamental myths of African culture including religion and myths (Sánchez-Blake 188).

My particular approach to Santos-Febres' recent narrative is framed by Postcolonial Studies. One of the most prominent voices in postcolonial theory and studies is that of Frantz Fanon. In identifying himself as a former colonized subject and through his medical training, Fanon studied the effects of colonization on former colonized subjects. Although his first major work *Black Skin, White Masks* focuses on people of African heritage living in Martinique, a French colony, these ideas are applicable to former colonized subjects everywhere. Because the author Mayra Santos-Febres and the protagonists of her works *Nuestra señora de la noche* and *La amante de Gardel* are Black women in the Caribbean, this theory is a useful tool in the analysis of how these women are accepted or rejected in their society.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon focuses on ways in which Black people have to exist in two worlds: the world they share with people that are Black like them and their former colonizers' world. In this existence Black individuals are aware that they are inferior to White men and attempt to compensate this inferiority. The Black man strives for Whiteness. Since he cannot physically change the color of his skin, the Black individual attempts to reach this ideal white status through interracial relationships, his use of language—French—and through accepting France as the motherland.

Fanon not only focuses on the internalized inferiority of the Black individual, he also sheds light on the othering of black individuals. He confronts the white gaze by speaking out about his own experiences as a Black man. Fanon considers the ways in which he as a Black man differs from a White man, and ultimately brings to light that skin tone is what separates him and any other man. In writing *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon expresses his longing for acceptance, not acceptance as a Black man, but acceptance as a man.

In a similar vein, the concept of *otherness* has been useful in my analysis of Santos-Febres' depiction of Black women's experiences. Afro-Puerto Rican women, as they are depicted in the texts, are *othered* because they are phenotypically different and are a minority on the island. In the Santos-Febres texts, the *othering* of these individuals is purposely done by the author. In Sara Ahmed's "Recognizing Strangers" she expounds on the idea of the stranger. It is too simple to say that the stranger is one that we do not recognize. Ahmed establishes that a stranger can be someone whom we have already encountered or someone *recognized as other* based on appearance. Strangers are those who do not belong in given spaces at any given time. In order to recognize strangers, one has to establish who the strangers are; Ahmed argues that in creating the image of the stranger, one differentiates himself from the stranger; and one has to define him or herself as a part of an exclusive group, and those who do not belong to this said group are strangers.

Ahmed uses the concept of a neighborhood to expound on this idea of the stranger. She defines a neighborhood as a unit that protects the individuals inhabiting the same space. These spaces work at their best when the group is homogenous, and when the group

is made up of similar individuals; the neighborhood becomes a pure space. Within these “pure” spaces, individuals of this neighborhood can easily determine who belongs in their pure and safe spaces or not. These groups care for their neighborhoods so they must protect them and keep those who do not belong out of their communities. A good citizen of the community, one who is a part of the group, can and should be suspicious of persons or activities in the community that are not normal, and this creates the idea that the stranger is dangerous.

In her “In the Company of Strangers” post on her research blog, Ahmed also says that the stranger is a dark shadowy figure. She intentionally uses the word dark to connect the concept of the stranger to race. She points out that racialization of the stranger is not always immediately recognized, but some bodies—usually dark bodies—are more often the stranger than other bodies (feministkilljoys.com). In analyzing the texts by Santos-Febres, I will take note of how the female characters of African heritage are treated in various spaces throughout the text.

In her work Santos-Febres also focuses on the United States’ involvement in Puerto Rico and how it affects all who inhabit the island. Mimi Sheller’s *Consuming the Caribbean* sheds light on the consumption of that part of the world, and these ideas can be connected to Santos-Febres’ novels since they portray various types of consumption, including Black womens’ bodies and the flora and fauna in the region. According to Sheller the Caribbean is separated from the imagined Modern-West and is considered as a developing part of the world. Sheller also argues that the image of the Caribbean is fixed—it is a tropical paradise (Sheller 13). Because this area is not a part of the Modernized-West and because it is seen

as a place to relax or a destination for pleasure, North America and Western Europe use these islands to their advantage. These nations use the resources, ideas and people of the Caribbean for their own financial gains, medical research and pleasure. Caribbean bodies, natural environments, cultures and commodities are consumed for the advancement and pleasure of the Modern-West and at the expense of the Caribbean islands.

This thesis will be composed of three chapters. In the first chapter, I will review in greater detail how blackness became a part of Puerto Rican identity. After reviewing the history of Puerto Rico's African roots, I will examine how this blackness is portrayed in literature. In order to better understand how Afro-Puerto Ricans, and women in particular, have been portrayed in literature and contextualize Santos-Febres' recent work, I will provide an overview of some works produced by Puerto Rican writers of earlier generations.

The second chapter will focus on the othering of the Afro-Puerto Rican woman by use of narrative techniques and the plot in *Nuestra señora de la noche*. Through the narrative techniques used by Santos-Febres we can establish that there is a clear distinction between individuals of European descent and individuals of African descent. By connecting religious figures to characters in the novel, I determine in what ways white characters assume the superior role in society. In this chapter I will examine how the othering occurs, and establish that a color-based hierarchy exists in the text. I will also focus on the methods in which Santos-Febres uses Isabel to combat the stigma of being *othered*.

The final chapter will use *La amante de Gardel* to study if and how Micaela Thorné attempts to achieve whiten her identity by comparing the protagonist to the ideas of Fanon. Firstly, I establish Micaela as the “stranger” within mainstream Puerto Rican society. Because Micaela is aware that she is the stranger and since this novel is written in the first person and story reads as more personal, I will examine how she deals with being a *stranger* on her own island and how she challenges the role of the *other* assigned to her. I will also study in what ways Puerto Ricans are *strangered* on their own island and the role the United States plays in the *othering* and manipulation of Puerto Rican individuals.

Chapter 1. Dark History: An Overview of Puerto Rico's African Roots and the Portrayal of Blackness in Puerto Rican Literature

Puerto Rican history proves that blackness and African heritage is a part of the Puerto Rican identity (Allen 120). Even with its strong African roots, Puerto Rico does not often depict the Afro-Puerto Rican in popular culture. 20th century Puerto Rican writers have tried—and some have failed—to provide nuanced portrayals of Afro-Puerto Rican heritage in their works. In my view, author Mayra Santos-Febres is one of few Puerto Rican writers that display blackness in her literary works without reinforcing negative stereotypes. In her work she creates a space in which she recognizes the existence of the Afro-Puerto Rican and combats the trivialization of the Afro-Puerto Rican woman's identity by addressing the race and gender based issues that they face and by creating multidimensional black Puerto Rican women. In this chapter I will connect the work of Santos-Febres to the history of racial formations and the subjectivity of black women in Puerto Rico by reviewing the historical context for the construction of race and national identity on the island. In addition, I examine 20th century literary reflections on these issues and provide an overview of ways in which racial and gender based issues addressed in *La amante de Gardel* and *Nuestra señora de la noche* fit into Santos-Febres' larger body of work.

Puerto Rico as we know it today has a rich culture of diverse influences. Unlike the majority of Latin America, Puerto Rico fell victim to two colonizers, Spain and the United States of America. Because the island has had a long history of colonization, it can be difficult to distinguish how Puerto Rican identity is defined. The island, which is currently United States territory, is unique in its own right, but the aspects of Puerto Rican culture that make the island unique are products of colonization and cultures of resistance to

foreign domination. The indigenous population that inhabited the island before Spanish settlers arrived was wiped out in the first half of the 16th century not long after the Spanish colonizers arrived (Duany 55). All aspects of life including languages—Spanish and English—and religion were brought over from somewhere else.

Not only did colonization affect what we know as Puerto Rican life and culture, colonization also played a role in the identity of Puerto Rican people today. Puerto Ricans are descendants of former colonizers and the people they colonized. Like most of the Americas, slavery is engrained in Puerto Rican history. There were not as many enslaved Africans in Puerto Rico as there were in other parts of the Americas.

From 1600 on, the island never had a slave population that was greater than 15 percent of the total population, and usually the figure hovered from 5 percent to 9 percent. In the French islands it averaged from 80 percent to 90 percent; in the British colonies, from 75 percent to 95 percent (West-Durán 49).

Puerto Rico had a less prosperous sugar economy than other Caribbean islands and required fewer African slaves. Because the resources were not available to purchase and maintain large amounts of slaves, slave owners took care of the slaves they did have. Although slavery was not abolished in Puerto Rico until 1873, a large amount of black people on the island were already free. Slaves were able to work for wages during their free time and with their salaries, and they were able to buy their own freedom and the freedom of their relatives (Alleyne 117). The influence of the Roman Catholic Church was an influencing factor in the treatment of slaves in Puerto Rico and the rest of Latin America. The Church baptized African slaves, allowed marriages and buried them in holy ground. It was also illegal to separate slave families (118).

The components Puerto Rican economy may have also played a role in the conditions for slaves in Puerto Rico. Since the sugar farms did not produce enough income

to maintain the island, the dominant group did not rely solely on the sugar farms and the slaves that maintained them.

Puerto Rico experienced greater racial mixture than elsewhere in the Caribbean, its economy was not completely dominated by sugar, and its relative lack of importance (compared to Mexico, Peru, and Cuba) were all factors that uniquely shaped Puerto Rico as a non-plantation society (West- Durán 49).

Even though it seems as if Spanish colonies were more liberal than the Anglo-American colonies in this regard, neither African slaves nor free Blacks on the island were equal to those of European descent. White people had total control over every aspect of life, and they used harsh methods to reiterate this idea. Slaves were mutilated, raped and even forced to eat human excrement (López 172). They even established laws to protect white individuals from those of African descent and reduce the risk of slave rebellions. The Edict Against the African Race of 1848 called for severe punishment of any black person found guilty of striking or even threatening a White person (West-Durán 51). Even with this, some believe that current race relations in modern day Latin America are not problematic because this treatment of African slaves was not as harsh as the treatment of slaves in Anglo-America.³

White men also demonstrated their power over oppressed groups through sexual relationships with indigenous and African women. Intermixing between Spanish men and indigenous women occurred before the indigenous population was decimated in the 16th century (López 164). Slave owners also felt that they have the right to engage in sexual intercourse with their female slaves (166). In the instances of both indigenous women and African women, Spanish men preferred women with lighter complexion and these sexual

³ Iberian Exceptionalism is the idea that racial prejudice in Latin America is essentially absent. Scholars and researchers have been challenging this idea (Peña et al 749).

relationships between the colonizers and the colonized were created under power issues, power struggle? (167).

Even after the emancipation of slaves in Puerto Rico, black or mulatto people were not allowed to marry to marry white people. White people focused on keeping their bloodlines pure as only white people were afforded certain opportunities like positions in the military and the clergy (Alleyne 121). Not only were legal unions between colored people and people of European ancestry prohibited, black men who were suspected of having relations with white women would be subject to castration or death. The white women that had relations with black men were ostracized by others from the dominant group (López 166).

It is important to note the restrictions that not only limited people based on heritage but also gender. It is evident that women were more restricted than men in Puerto Rico. Using interracial relationships as an example, white men were free to engage in relations with women of color—indigenous and African— without repercussion while white women were not allowed to do so. The Spanish colonizers reinforced gender based inequality, but the power struggle between men and women was already present on the island before the Spanish arrived. Evidence suggests that the natives that inhabited the island bartered women to the Spanish conquistadors in order to build ties between the indigenous and European people (López 164). Indigenous women were treated as if they were physical property owned by the men of their tribes.

Racial mixing has been a part of Puerto Rico and the rest of the Americas since colonizers took control over these populations. Even though there are high rates of miscegenation in the Caribbean and even higher rates in Puerto Rico, a racial hierarchy has

existed since the colonizers took control of the island. White people born in Spain were at the top of the hierarchy, followed by *criollos*. Mixed raced people and *indios* fell in place after Whites, leaving *negros* at the bottom of the hierarchy (López 167). Historically, the colonizers and their descendants have been on top of the racial hierarchy and persons of color—Black, indigenous and in between—fell in order beneath the dominant group.

We see evidence of this race-based hierarchy in the treatment and enslavement of the people native to the island and the African people brought to the island. We also see this in the laws established to not only to separate but to protect people of European descent from brown people. Because these people are ethnically mixed and racially diverse, it is often difficult to pinpoint distinct racial categories in present day Puerto Rico. This has caused the racism seen in Puerto Rico to evolve. Currently, the racial hierarchy in Puerto Rico is not blood based, but skin color based.

The lines of racial demarcation are now less distinctive in the aftermath of an increase in interracial marriages that will necessarily continue into the future. Unfortunately, the act of discrimination has not dissipated, but has manifested in the context of skin color. Skin color cuts across racial lines to approximate similar results (Hall 1527).

It is important to establish that the construct of race is extremely different in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean from in Anglo-America. The racial categories that exist in Puerto Rico do not exist in the United States. Not only are the racial categories different, Puerto Ricans determine race differently than Anglo-Americans. Race on the island is not determined by blood as it is in the United States. Researcher Ruben Allen in a study on the 2010 United States Census found that the race and ethnicity categories provided are not appropriate for accurately defining the racial identities of Puerto Rican citizens. Since Puerto Rico is a part of the United States and we collect information about race, this poses a

problem for statistics gathered on the island. In the 2010 United States Census 75 percent of Puerto Ricans self-identified as White and White alone (Allen 608). Based on the history of Puerto Rico, we do know that white people have always been a large majority of the population, but if we consider the high rates of the miscegenation in the Caribbean, this data does not seem accurate. Instead of identifying as Black or White, Puerto Ricans use their phenotype to determine their race. There exists *blanco, negro, triqueño, indio, jabao* and a mixture of these identities (617).

It is also important to consider that in the United States Whiteness is determined by excluding anyone who has one drop of non-White blood. The opposite occurs in Puerto Rico, where White is more inclusive. “Typically, in the Caribbean if you are not Black you are White, whereas in North America it is the reverse” (West-Durán 54). When we use Anglo-American standards to group and identify Puerto Rican citizens we have to consider that they identify as White because based on their Latin-American standards they are White. This has been causing issues for all Puerto Ricans since the United States took authority over the island. Some Puerto Ricans who were identified as White on the island were categorized as Black when migrating to the United States (López 174).

Historically, White Puerto Rican people—who have consistently been the dominant group on the island—were still considered inferior to Euro-Americans in Anglo-America. “With the North American intervention, Puerto Rican elites came face to face with a new version of white supremacy that placed even the whitest and most educated islanders in a subservient position to the Euro-American” (Roy- Féquière 6). This supports the idea that racism in the United States played a part in race relations on the island.

Although some have blamed racism in Puerto Rico on the impact the United States has had on the island, it is important to note that there is evidence of varying degrees of racism and discrimination against Black people on all of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean island: “We found that same general trend for all three Latin American samples as well. Whites had levels of implicit prejudice against Blacks that were significantly greater than zero in Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico” (Peña et al 756). Race relations in the United States may have had and may still have an impact on racism and discrimination in Puerto Rico; however, based on the history of Puerto Rico and based on the presence of color-based discrimination throughout the Spanish-speaking Caribbean it is logical to conclude that racism in Puerto Rico has Spanish roots.

Like the rest of the Spanish- speaking Caribbean islands, Puerto Rico downplays and sometimes denies racial inequality. There is an assumption that darker skinned Puerto Ricans are not subjected to maltreatment based on their skin color and that all Puerto Ricans embrace and even promote the different colors that make up the population. According to a study done by Peña, Sidanius and Sawyer, those who self-identified as white had implicit prejudice against black people in all of the nations that make up the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Although they found that Anglo-Europeans had greater implicit prejudice against blacks in the United States, prejudice does exist in these self-proclaimed egalitarian societies like Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic. In their study, the researchers also found evidence that people of color from these nations have implicit prejudice against darker colored people (Peña et al 756).

Present-day Puerto Ricans are aware of their mixed ethnicities; however, some deny a crucial part of their ancestry. They want to separate themselves from the African roots

that make who they are. In attempts to define who they are as Puerto Rican people, some have over-exaggerated the pieces of their indigenous heritage and diminished components of their African heritage, a phenomenon studied by Jorge Duany:

A close analysis of both the hegemonic discourse and institutional practices on Puerto Rican identity reveals the systematic overvaluation of the Hispanic element, the romanticization of the Taíno Indians, and the underestimation of African-derived ingredients. In the process of constructing their image of Puerto Ricanness, cultural nationalists have symbolically made Indians out of blacks. That is, they have often exaggerated the indigenous roots while neglecting the African contribution to the Island's largely mulatto population and hybrid culture (76).

Some are not only attempting to minimize their African roots; they are attempting to eliminate their African heritage completely. "The more common treatment of the concept *indio* is to redefine it as one of the replacements of the discredited concept of *negro* (Alleyne 128). It appears that being indigenous is more desirable than being black. This desirability can be blamed on the color-based hierarchy that exists now and has existed in Puerto Rico since the arrival of the Spanish. Being identified as black establishes a connection between the painful past of slavery and inferiority, and for many, this is shameful (West-Durán 54). It is also important to consider that the Indian is the symbol of resisting Western dominance (Godreau 225). In this way, identifying as indigenous instead of as Black, can be considered a way to fight against the colonizer.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century Puerto Rican literature began to flourish. A great deal of the literature from this time period served to create a Puerto Rican identity. In 1898 power over the island was transferred from Spain to the United States after the Spanish American War. In an attempt to separate themselves from the new colonial power, Puerto Rican writers tried to establish who exactly who they were. While defining what it meant to be Puerto Rican and defining who Puerto Ricans were, these

writers clung to the aspects of culture left behind by their previous colonizers, the Spanish (Roy-Féquièrre 4).

Puerto Rican literature during this time period was dominated by white men, *criollos*. According to the Library of Congress, 85% of late 19th century and early 20th century Puerto Ricans were illiterate. With an extremely low literacy rate, it would be fair to assume that education was a privilege allowed for select groups; and these white writers are evidence that the groups that had access to education were male and white. Because of the lack of diversity in Puerto Rican writers during this time, white Puerto Ricans were responsible for creating Puerto Rican literacy culture (Roy- Féquièrre 231).

Essays and other non-fiction publications were important parts of 20th century Puerto Rican literature. Scholar Tomás Blanco used his work to establish a national identity. In his 1948 work “El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico,” Blanco examines race based prejudice and discrimination on the island. Blanco compares the treatment of African-Americans in the Southern states in the United States to the treatment of Afro-Puerto Ricans on the island. He argues that racial prejudice was more prominent in the United States than in Puerto Rico. He uses slavery, religion, laws and even derogatory names for people of African descent in an effort to make his argument valid. In the text Blanco did not deny that racial prejudice was absent in Puerto Rico; however, he did not provide instances in which Afro-Puerto Ricans were discriminated against. “El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico” paints Puerto Rican society as inclusive and egalitarian.

Not all scholars thought like Tomás Blanco. José Luis Gonzáles is one of few 20th century thinkers who discussed and embraced the importance of African heritage in Puerto Rico. In his work *El pais de cuatro pisos* (1989) Gonzáles shares that of the three races that

make up the nation, the African race is most important and even claims that the first Puerto Ricans were black (20).

In 20th century literary works, creative writers did venture out and use their artistic space to include African-heritage in the conceptualizations of Puerto Ricanness. Quite often the images they created were simple and one-dimensional or the issues they targeted were indirect. One of the most successful pieces of Puerto Rican literature in the 19th century, *La cuarterona* (1867) by Alejandro Tapia y Rivera depicts the prohibited romantic relationship between an upper-class white man Carlos and Julia, a *mulata* servant. Due to issues with censorship in Puerto Rico, Tapia set the play in Cuba. Although the play addresses issues with racism and slavery and has abolitionist undertones—the play was written before slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico—it was criticized for not being direct (West- Durán 54).

Another *criollo* writer Luis Palés Matos—the leading force behind *negrista* poetry in 20th century Puerto Rico— took initiative by recognizing blackness as a part Puerto Rico of heritage. In his famous collection of poetry *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* Palés Matos attempts to celebrate black identity. Although he recognizes the often ignored Afro-Puerto Rican in his work, in images he creates, the black Puerto Rican is very simple and one-dimensional. Even with titles like “Majestad negra” the poet reiterates negative stereotypes of people of African heritage. Throughout the collection Palés Matos equates Africa to a jungle and gives black people animal like characteristics.

The poem “Danza negra,” is one example of his work simplifying the identities of people of African heritage. As he makes connections between Africa and the Caribbean, “Haití, Martinica, Congo, Camerún,” he connects Afro- Caribbean people to their African

heritage. Not only does this link black people back to their roots, it also establishes that the images of black people that he portrayed in the poem are universal. In Palés Matos' use of rhythm and sounds, he limits this entire group to drumbeats and dance. This poem also portrays black people as animal like. The Gran Cocoroco makes noises instead of words like the *cerdo en el fango*. Even though it is not believed that Palés Matos was intentionally racist with his work, the racism is evident.

The portrayal of Black issues by *criollo* writers in Puerto Rican literature is problematic. Because these writers in particular were not of African heritage, they were outside of the culture looking into the culture (Roy-Féquièrre 237). Their white gaze prevented them from seeing the multi-dimensional aspects of Afro-Puerto Rican culture and minimized the issues that this marginalized group faced. Because their white gaze interfered, they could not reproduce a culturally sensitive image of Afro culture in their work. These conflicts were not commonplace for Caribbean writers who were of African heritage like Nicolás Guillén. This is why diversity in Puerto Rican literature is necessary in portraying accurate images of Afro-Puerto Ricans.

With her only collection of poetry *Ambar mulatto* (1938) María Colón Pellot faced a unique set of obstacles in order to produce literature on the island. Because black bodies were not included in popular Puerto Rican culture and the white *intelligentsia* controlled literature and art, Colón Pellot denied race and racial issues in order to enter the literary discussion on national identity and to be taken seriously. Even though she denied her blackness, the 1930's poet created a literary space in which people of African heritage exist, and used her verses to speak on behalf of Afro-Puerto Ricans living in a society dominated by White people. Her work intersects blackness and womanhood. In the lines of her poem

“Motivos de envidia mulata,” Colón Pellot separates whiteness from blackness. The speaker of the poem, a *mulata* woman, envies out the freedom of the white cloud that is representative of the white woman. The poem portrays the superiority of the White woman in comparison to the *mulata* or Black woman. Colón Pellot’s work demonstrates that white Puerto-Rican women experiences life differently than non-White Puerto-Rican women. White women have a higher position in society and they are able to express their sexuality differently than their darker skinned counterparts (Jiménez-Muñoz 87).

Some critics of her work argue that in this act of denying racial issues, Colón Pellot rejects her own blackness; although the voice in her verses are of African descent. Other writers during this time period did not have these obstacles when writing about blackness in Puerto Rico. Even though the *negrista* poetry had become popular on the island, writers like Palés Matos did not have the burden of actually being *negro* or *mulato* (79).

Julia de Burgos is also recognized for using Blackness in her poem “Ay ay ay de la grifa negra.” It is clear that the speaker of the poem is a Black woman. Unlike the work of Colón Pellot mentioned above, de Burgos makes this poem about identity, the history and the future of blackness. De Burgos connects the speakers Blackness to her *nariz mozambiquea* and the *grifería* of her hair, the speaker in her entirety is Black. The speaker, who heard that her grandmother was a slave, sheds light on the shame that this history brings to her.

Writers from the later part of the 20th century did not have to concern themselves with censorship issues or pretending as if their works did not deal with racial issues in Puerto Rico. Rosario Ferré included Puerto Ricans of Africa heritage in her literary works

like *Maldito amor* (1986) and *House on the Lagoon* (1995). The plot of *Maldito amor* includes a prohibited romance between Arístedes, a white man from a wealthy family, and a *mulata* nurse Gloria. Instead of limiting people of African descent and reducing them to domestic help and slaves, Ferré creates a space in which the *mulata* character is multidimensional. In this text she also challenges the idea of the purity of White bloodlines in Puerto Rico by making the members of this elite family descendants of a Black man (West-Durán 60).

Ferré, like Santos-Febres, has also written about the iconic Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer. In her short story “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres,” (1979) Ferré sets up the tales of two women in love with the same man. This storyline is unique because both of the women in this novel are named after Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer. She takes the same woman and creates two different personas. Isabel Luberza—a white, upper-class woman—is portrayed as the proper wife of Ambrosio, and Isabel *la negra* is his lover. In the tale the reader finds that the wife of Ambrosio is jealous of the erotic power of *la negra*, while *la negra* is envious of the economic power and social status of the wife (Balseiro 5). By making both women jealous of one another for different reasons, Ferré mirrors the sexualization of the Black woman in Puerto Rican society and her inability to achieve a higher social status regardless of her wealth.

Even though these 20th century writers included depictions of Afro-Puerto Ricans in their texts, Mayra Santos-Febres and her works go further in creating more complex images of Afro-Puerto Ricans. With all of her novels, short stories and poetry, Santos-Febres not only acknowledges Afro-Puerto Rican identities, she also embraces these identities. In her first work *Anamu y manigua* (1990), a collection of poems, Santos-Febres

connects herself and her ancestry to Afro-Puerto Rican identity. With poems about her grandmother and mother she writes about traditions of Afro-descendants and blackness. This collection of poetry also political issues by including fragmentation, disconnect and oxymorons as a symbol of colonialism in Puerto Rico (Celis et al 27). In her collection of short stories *Pez de vidrio* (1994) she addresses race issues and sex. She also includes even more marginalized groups in her works like the young drag queen in *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000). In her short novel *Fe en disfraz* (2009) Santos-Febres uses an Afro-Latina protagonist called Fe and a white Puerto Rican love interest Carlos as a modern subversive slave narrative to address the history of sexual violence between Black slaves and White men and the hyper-sexualization of Afro-women (Rangelova 150). *Fe en disfraz* does address some of the same issues concerning the status of Afro-Latinas in their societies in the primary texts *Nuestra señora de la noche* and *La amante de Gardel*.

Mayra Santos-Febres is well aware of the stereotypes that followed Black women in 20th century Puerto Rico. In a 2012 interview with *ConversanDos* she acknowledges that Black women on the island tended to work in three areas. The first area was the household. Some Black women were domestic help. Other Black women turned to the streets to survive, working as sex workers or doing other illegal activities. The last group of Black women chose religion and became nuns. Although Santos-Febres reproduces works that include Black women protagonists doing these very stereotypical activities, like Isabel in *Nuestra señora de la noche*, she presents the readers with multi-dimensional women who are not limited to the stereotypes that define them.

In her work, she addresses social issues and racial issues that were previously ignored in Puerto Rican popular culture. First, she creates a space in which artistic work

includes black protagonists. Black women have always been and still are underrepresented in Puerto Rican popular culture. Because Santos- Febres is a part of this marginalized group, she draws attention to and produces the image of the Afro-Puerto Rican woman without limiting her. Instead of using her artistic space to change the profession of Isabel Oppenheimer, a real madam in Puerto Rico, Santos- Febres makes the protagonist of *Nuestra señora de la noche* multi-dimensional. Isabel is portrayed as powerful, rich, intelligent and beautiful. Santos-Febres provides the reader with a complete story of her life and her attempt to overcome the burdens of being a Black woman.

In her latest novel *La amante de Gardel* Santos- Febres completely destroys the black woman-sex worker-servant-nun narrative. The completely fictional protagonist Micaela Thorné is a black nursing student. Although she is in a sexual relationship with Carlos Gardel, she does not have to survive by using her body in 1930's Puerto Rico. Even though the focus of the story is on the romantic relationship between the singer and the student, we do find out that Micaela does eventually become successful in the medical field through her own effort.

Santos- Febres criticizes the racist attitudes of Puerto Rican society by acknowledging these attitudes in the first place. Unlike the show *Mi familia*, Santos- Febres' work portrays the issues that black Puerto Ricans face by including instances of racism and discrimination in the text. Not only does Santos-Febres call our attention to issues that Afro- Puerto Rican women faced, she also sheds light on the issues faced by all Puerto Ricans caused by the re-colonization of Puerto Rico by the United States. The writer creates spaces in *Nuestra señora de la noche* and *La amante de Gardel* in which white Anglo-Americans *other* White Puerto Ricans.

Chapter 2. Othering Blackness: Analyzing the Othering of Afro-Puerto Rican Women in *Nuestra señora de la noche*

Nuestra señora de la noche by Mayra Santos-Febres is a literary account of the lives of those surrounding the infamous madam Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, better known as *La negra*. In the novel we meet various characters from different backgrounds, nationalities and *races*, but they are all connected by the protagonist. The reader witnesses Isabel grow from a young girl, abandoned by her mother at forty days old, to a self-sufficient, and rather powerful, woman. Throughout this text—which has an actual Afro-Puerto Rican woman as the protagonist—the reader sees Isabel triumph, struggle and is even given an account of her death. Santos-Febres' postcolonial novel depicts the black woman, who has been underrepresented and inaccurately represented in Puerto Rican literature, in a more honest light. With more suitable depictions of the Black woman and struggles that she faces in this particular setting, the novel demonstrates ways in which Afro-Puerto Rican women are *othered*. Through postcolonial theory and the concept of decolonization, we can establish that this *othering* is a result of the long lasting effects of the colonization of Puerto Rico, which decimated the native population and established a color-based hierarchy. In this chapter I will analyze how the decolonization of the image of the Afro-Puerto Rican woman takes place in the novel through the connection between characters of European descent and Christian deities, the emphasis the existence of a color-based hierarchy through language and highlight how the *othering* of Afro-Puerto Rican women occurs within the text.

Although the novel was written in 2006, the setting takes place over the span of Isabel's life in twentieth century Puerto Rico (1901-1974). The reader sees the characters in the novel experience authentic twentieth century conflicts like the presence of the

United States on the island, Prohibition and World War II. Even though Santos-Febres includes the conflicts experienced between people and governments, the clash among Puerto Rican people is more prominent in this novel. *Nuestra Señora de la noche* paints a vivid picture of the varied roles of diverse groups of people on the island. It is obvious to the reader that darker, more phenotypically African characters, male and female, are victims of discrimination; however, darker women in the narrative experience very specific types of oppression because they are not only Black, but they are Black and female. The reader observes that the issues that Isabel and other supporting, phenotypically African, female characters face are strikingly similar because their identities put them in a fixed position in the social hierarchy of Puerto Rico.

In *Nuestra señora de la noche* we learn that even after colonization and slavery ended in Puerto Rico, the Afro-Puerto Rican woman is still enslaved, not by chains, but by the ideology of the elite group that determines social norms in twentieth century Puerto Rico. She uses this story as a window to actual struggles of Black Puerto Ricans, and by pointing out the issues inflicted on Black Puerto Rican women; she challenges the authority of normal group. By creating an Afro-Puerto Rican protagonist who is clever and has the capacity to transcend poverty, Santos- Febres rewrites the narrative of Black women in Puerto Rican literature. Throughout the brief history of Puerto Rican literature, very few Afro-Puerto Rican writers have been represented, and the depiction of Black individuals in Puerto Rican literature by white or elite writers further marginalized individuals of African heritage. By telling us this tale, Santos-Febres uses her authority as a Puerto Rican woman of African heritage to create the image of the Black woman in Puerto Rico. In this chapter we will examine the effects of colonization on the Afro- Puerto Rican women because of her

race alone. First, it is important to look at the separation of Black individuals and White individuals and the color-based hierarchy created in the language used by the narrator of the novel.

A key component of postcolonial theory examines how the colonized are *othered*. A group of people who consider themselves as the *norm* creates a negative space for people who are not like them. Those who are *different* from the group that establishes itself as the *norm*, are considered the *other*.

The 'Other' is an individual who is perceived by the group as not belonging, or as being different in some fundamental way. Perceived as lacking essential characteristics possessed by the group, the 'Other' is almost always seen as a lesser or inferior being and is treated accordingly. The 'Other' in a society may have few or no legal rights, may be characterized as less intelligent or as immoral, and may even be regarded as sub-human (Melani 1).

Although a person can be considered an *other* based on his or her race, nationality, religion or sexual orientation, in *Nuestra señora de la noche* Santos-Febres makes a point to establish which groups are the *normal* groups and which groups are not, and she uses the artistic space to focus on the apparent division between those of African descent and those who are not of African descent. Santos- Febres represents the *othering* of individuals of African heritage in this novel which is based on historical fact. The author recreates the color- hierarchy, a result of this *othering*, and presents to the reader the effects of this oppressive system on the *other* in *Nuestra señora de la noche*. By using actual events and real people to tell this story, Santos- Febres makes the idea that she is mirroring legitimate *othering* and color- based oppression in the novel more feasible.

In *Nuestra señora de la noche*, the model group of Puerto Rican society is of European ancestry like the conquistadores and former slave owners. The characters that make up this *normal* group are not only white, but they also have inherited wealth. Since

these characters are from the upper class, we as readers can assume that they do not represent the majority of the Puerto Rican population. Even though they are a part of the Puerto Rican elite, this exclusive group establishes the social norms for all of those who live in their society. “The ‘Other’ is not necessarily a numerical minority... The group which is defining the ‘Other’ may be an entire society, a social class or a community within a society, a family...” (Melani 1). The fictional, but real society presented to the reader in this novel is structured for the advancement of the rich, white characters that have put themselves atop the social structure in Puerto Rico.

The *othering* of black individuals, and more specifically these Afro-Puerto Rican women that we see in *Nuestra señora de la noche*, in Puerto Rican society is a direct result of colonization. Puerto Rico, like a large portion of the Americas, was once a colony of Spain. The Kingdom of Spain not only colonized land, but they colonized people as well which included the purchasing and trading of African slaves and the destroying indigenous populations. The Spanish, who had wealth and the authorization of God, took total control over the physical land and ruled the human bodies that were not phenotypically European. Since being European requires having very specific physical characteristics, it was not difficult to establish who was born with this authority and who was not. Because people of color, those of African heritage, had no power, they were considered the inferior, and therefore, became the *other*. During the colonial period, conquistadores created caste systems based on physical characteristics and even attempted to rid the colonies of the Black race (Chavez-Dueñas 7). This caste system survived in Puerto Rico—as well as the

rest of the Caribbean—after the termination of slavery and even after the transfer of power from Spain to the United States.⁴

Because we can consider *Nuestra señora de la noche* as a postcolonial text, we can examine how Santos- Febres uses the novel to decolonize the image of the black woman in Puerto Rico. Decolonization is not only the result of an imperial power letting go of a colony, it can also be considered as a process. Former colonized people attempt to separate themselves from their oppressors and establish and define their own identities, a process that can take place through literature. “Decolonization has been more recently figured prominently in literary criticism, itself informed by cultural anthropology, the new hybrid most frequently described as colonial or postcolonial discourse, with “discourse” meaning not only language but the cultural conditions that inform and direct it. Decolonization implies for some critics changes of attitude and mentality in both those communities once simply defined as “home” and “abroad” (Betts 4). With the act of telling this story, Santos- Febres decolonizes from the restrictions that colonization imposed on real Puerto Rican individuals of African descent. She uses this novel to portray actual oppression of Black Puerto Rican women through the lens of her own reality. “Writers have a marvelous tool at their disposal, imagination, which allows them to make believe. They can attribute to fictional characters things they themselves feel and think... What does the literature of the ex-colonized tell us” (Memmi 36)?

Many critics have mentioned the sexualization and oppression of the Black, female body in Santos- Febres’ novel. Some critics contribute that factors other than appearance

⁴ Even though the United States of America took control of Puerto Rico in 1898 and has influenced the climate of society since then, when studying race* on the island, we must use the same lens used in studying race in the rest of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Race and heritage are constructed differently in Puerto Rico and the United States of America. Their racial identities are more similar to other former colonies of Spain.

help influence the oppression of Afro-Puerto Rican women, in particular Isabel. In the first paragraph of the novel, the reader is introduced to Isabel with all three of her titles, her name, her color then her profession, “Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer. La Negra Luberza. La Madama de Maragüez” (Santos-Febres 1). According to Méndez Pandedas, these titles are organized by importance: surnames are used to demonstrate the importance of lineage, race is used to identify the importance of skin tone, and profession is used to identify status (Méndez Panedas 2). In the tale of her life, we find that Isabel did not come from an affluent family, she is Black, and she is a madam; however, neither her lineage nor her profession are responsible for the oppression inflicted on her. These things have a miniscule role, if any, in this *othering*. Her appearance is the root of her suffering; she is trapped in this inferior position in Puerto Rican society because she is black. She uses what she is given to improve socially; however, her wealth does not negate her blackness. She is still no match for the white and wealthy, she is still the *other*. Weldt- Basson also discusses the oppression of Afro-Puerto Rican women in her article how Isabel is portrayed as a heroine combating patriarchy. Although there is reference to her ethnic identity, Weldt-Basson focuses on how Isabel’s career choice plays a role in the oppression she faces instead of calling the attention to Isabel’s body. In my view Afro-Puerto Rican women are victims of oppression because their identities meet at the intersection of black and female. Their identities is culpable for all of the other issues that come with this...

The *othering* and discrimination of black individuals in *Nuestra señora de la noche* is seen in multiple levels of the novel. One important way in which the novel decolonizes the image of the Afro- Puerto Rican woman is through drawing attention to the superiority complex of white characters by connecting them to Christian religious figures. In order to

establish that oppression of people of non- European ancestry still exists even after the end of colonization, we must identify the dominant, elite group in Puerto Rican society in the setting of the novel and determine why the *othering* occurs. Characters of European descent, through their eyes, are made in the perfect image of God. The connections that are made between these white characters and the Holy Trinity and the Virgin Mary help demonstrate that these individuals consider themselves superior to the Afro- Puerto Rican characters. Because being white makes them superior and closer to God, the *othering* is justified. Although Jesus Christ was not European and had bronze-like flesh, the white and wealthy characters are able to separate themselves from the black people in their society because they believe that they are God and/or closer to being Godlike because of their skin tone. These connections are made in various examples in the novel.

In the pleas to the Virgin Mary, it is obvious that Cristina Ranger, the wife of Fernando Fornarís, believes that she is more like the Virgin Mary and is, therefore, better than Isabel. “Pero yo soy la imagen de tu semejanza. Para eso fui parida y concebida, para ser como tú y como mi madre y como la madre de mi madre” (Santos-Febres 103). Cristina believes that she was created in the image of the Holy Virgin Mary. Not only is she Mary, her mother and grandmother were also created in the same image. This establishes that this trait is inherited; this trait, like her European phenotype, is passed down through bloodlines.

Because she considers herself as the Virgin Mary in the twentieth-century flesh, she considers her husband Fernando Fornarís as God and Luis Arsenio, her son, as Jesus. Not only do white people in this society think of themselves as God or Godlike, other characters consider them as Godlike also. Santos –Febres makes this apparent by making comparisons

with Fernando Fornarís and God. Throughout the novel the old woman Doña Montse refers to him as “El Padre.” Yes, Fernando Fornarís is the “padre” or father of Roberto, but by making the title proper, he becomes the Father, God. People of African descent are in no way more Godlike than those with white skin. Cristina mentions the illegitimacy of the Virgin of Montserrat that in many images appears to be darker-skinned in her prayers to the lighter-skinned Virgin Mary:

Ella no, imposible. Virgen negra con niño blanco en el regazo. Virgen negra con nono blanco en el regazo. Pero ellas no son tú. Ellas no son las imágenes que de ti vienen desde Europa, desde lo Alto, que ratifica la Iglesia, y pone en sus altares. Reina Inmaculada, pálida y serena. Ellas son tu perturbación. Que yo me comparara con Aquella es una vejación (104).

In her prayers Cristina establishes the illegitimacy of people of the African diaspora when she denies the authenticity of the black Virgin because of her skin. She reestablishes the validity, superiority of white people when she implies that the real images of the Virgin, like her white ancestors, come from Europe.

The concept of white people as God and other religious figures not only justifies the *othering* of black people, but it also creates the idea that lighter people are saviors for the black people, in particularly the black women. Doña Montse spends the whole childhood of Roberto, “el Nene,” waiting for and depending on “el Padre.” She, in her delusions, spends a lot of time praying for Fernando to come to visit Roberto. Like Luis Arsenio is Jesus to Cristina, Roberto is the Christ to Doña Montse. Even though Roberto is biracial, he appears white in his childhood. He sits in Doña Montse’s lap and in her mind, she becomes the Virgin of Montserrat. He is the son of God because Fernando and his very pale skin are holy. He will save her. White figures in the novel are always “saving” black women.

Although Santos-Febres gives us characters who reinforce the idea that people of European descent are more like God, she finds ways to deconstruct this idea and decolonize the image of Puerto Rican women of African heritage. In the title of the novel *Nuestra señora*, she plays with a name used to reference the Holy Virgin Mary in the Christian faith. The reader can easily make the connections between the title of the novel and the protagonist Isabel. With the title of the text, Isabel assumes the role of the Virgin Mary; she becomes Our Lady of the night⁵.

Santos- Febres challenges concept of a pale Holy Virgin with the constant mention of the Virgin of Montserrat, the Black Madonna.

We also see Santos- Febres decolonize through the actions of the protagonist. Isabel, unlike the other black women that depend on the white families to provide them with employment or feed them, she dismisses the idea needing a savior. She relinquishes the rights to her biracial child, and immediately after Roberto's birth, she devises a plan to earn more money and become completely self-sufficient. This rejection of the lighter-skinned child symbolizes not only the rejection of a lighter person coming to save her dark soul, but the rejection of a man saving her. She finds salvation within herself.

Not only does Santos -Febres make Isabel like the Holy Virgin; she even makes Isabel a Christ-like figure. Once she has a home, she opens the doors to help other women. She then decides to open Elizabeth's Dance Hall to provide a safe place for impoverished women walking the streets. She makes sure that they are fed, clothed and protected. She donates some of her fortune to orphanages (mainly out of guilt) and other organizations around her community. Isabel is even betrayed like Jesus Christ. When walking out of the

⁵ She becomes Our Lady of the night because of her profession. The night portion of this title could even go as far as referring to her skin complexion.

church after the Bishop tries to destroy her, her patrons, who can be compared to the disciples of Jesus, deny Isabel exactly three times like Peter denied Jesus.

In the text we are also able to see how Afro- Puerto Rican females are oppressed and sexualized through the color-based hierarchy. The novel emphasizes the rigidity of this hierarchy and how it is constructed through language. For instance, the constant references to black female characters as dirty by characters of non-African descent and the relationships between the Afro- Puerto Rican women and European men. Santos-Febres establishes her text as a postcolonial narrative by revealing to the reader the long-lasting effects for individuals of African heritage, specifically women. One of the most impactful ways in which the novelist establishes that phenotypically African women are victims of *othering* and other effects of colonization in 20th century Puerto Rico is done with the reconstruction of the color-based hierarchy that exists(ed) at the time. For the majority of the novel, Santos- Febres uses an omniscient narrator to recount the lives of the characters, and with the detailed descriptions of the characters in the novel provided to us by the narrator, the text reestablishes a color-based hierarchy and mirrors the thoughts of actual Puerto Rican society. The hierarchy we see here in the text is a direct result of colonization. Non-white women are exoticized because of their genetic identity, and as a result of this, they are sexualized in a way that women of European ancestry alone are not and are considered inferior to these white women. Because of the high percentages of miscegenation in the Spanish speaking Caribbean, individuals who are more similar to African people in physical appearance are outliers. Those who are of mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds and have strong African features also suffer from the effects of colonization even if it is not to the degree that those who are phenotypically African alone

suffer. The color-based structure created in the text by the descriptions given to the reader by the narrator puts individuals that are closer to being white, those who have some European heritage, closer to the top of the hierarchy than those who are black; however, these same mixed heritage individuals, in particular women, are still oppressed.

Instead of starting the novel with full chapter, Santos-Febres opens *Nuestra señora de la noche* with a small section titled “Revelación.” In this introductory passage, the narrator begins to describe an extravagant charity event. The narrator introduces Isabel Oppenheimer, also known as la Negra Luberza, in this section:

El Cadillac del licenciado Canggiano paró en la rotunda del Casino. Un botones abrió la puerta y ofreció la mano para ayudar a la elegante dama que de seguro se bajaría de aquel carruaje lujoso. No se esperaba la mano enguantada que se muñeca llevaba un semanario de oro macizo al que le colgaba una medallita de la Virgen de la Caridad. Tampoco se esperaba que aquel guante dejara ver, a la altura del codo, un brazo duro, negro que brillaba contra la noche cerrada. Una gargantilla de brillantes adornaba el cuello de la Dama, también negro. Una cascada de bucles caía a ras de aquel cuello (Santos-Febres 1).

The reader, as well as the other characters attending and working at the charity event, expects that a prestigious woman will exit the vehicle, but we discover that this woman has a hard and black arm. Not only is her arm black, the neck that models the dazzling diamonds is also black. By literally introducing the woman –who we discover is Isabel – piece by piece, the reader is quickly slow-fed the idea that a black woman who works as a madam has the capacity to be elegant. The depiction of Isabel starts with her arm, and then there is an interruption used to describe the jewels she wears. Next, the narrator makes it clear to the reader that her neck is also black; the woman from exiting this vehicle is entirely black. The narrator uses specific language to prepare those who hear the tale for a black, Puerto Rican protagonist.

With this in depth physical description of Isabel, our narrator makes the reader aware of the things that make this woman distinctly black, the color of her skin and the curls in her hair; and Isabel becomes exoticized. Although there are other characters in this section of the novel, very few of them are described by their physical characteristics. Because the narrator focuses on the characteristics that make our protagonist of African descent and ignores going in to great detail with the physical appearances of the other characters, she establishes Isabel as the *other* based on her ethnic make-up/genetic make-up, identity. Also with this description and with the reaction of the other characters in this excerpt, we can assume that the exotic Isabel, an *other*, does not belong in this elegant space.

We can assume that the lack of language and the omission of physical descriptions of characters of European descent create characters that can be presumed as *normal*, and these normal characters belong in this exquisite space; these characters do not need to be physically described. Since this is a charity event hosted by the Red Cross and because there are bellhops and luxury cars, the people who are not described are the stereotypical people who attend these types of events and own these nice things. The only other characters that are described in this section are the attorney Fernando Fornarís—who we later discover is Isabel’s long-time lover—and his wife Cristina.

Entonces lo vio; al peor de todos. Isabel lo contempló vestido de smoking, con su barbilla cerrada, sus ojos verdes contra una piel pecosa, blanca enmarcada en su negrismo pelo engominado hacia atrás... Su mujer nívea... (Santos-Febres 3).

The reader can conclude that these two characters are described to distinguish them from the protagonist. The narrator does not describe the height or weight of Fernando; instead, she specifically describes the characteristics of Fernando that make him not “black.” By

describing Cristina as snowy, the narrator creates identity the complete opposite of Isabel. Even though at this point of the novel the reader is not aware of the affair between Isabel and Fernando, there is still other language used here to provide the differences between the attorney, his wife and his lover.

“Allí estaba el licenciado Fornarís con su esposa legítima del brazo” (3).

This establishes Cristina and her white skin as the more proper woman. Cristina is in solidarity with Fernando because they are physically attached to each other in this passage, both of their skin-tones are similar and they both have the status to be in the space at this time. She is established as his *legitimate* wife, but Fernando Fornarís does not have another wife to create a wife that is legitimate versus a wife that that is illegitimate. Isabel is only his mistress; there is no contract binding them together. By using this term *legitimate* the reader can conclude that this is the woman that Fernando is actually married to, but it also creates a contrast with Isabel. Since Cristina is legitimate, Isabel becomes illegitimate. The term *legítima* is used here to create the idea that the snow-white Cristina is occupying a space that she is allowed to occupy with this man as her husband.

Although the narrator also refers to her as Isabel in this excerpt, it is important that the title *La Negra* is used here because we can assume that she is referred to as the black woman because she is the only one in this space at this time. Being “black” is not simply a part of her identity, it becomes who she is. The narrator refers to her as *La Negra* here while the other characters interacting with her during the event call her *Doña Isabel*. Because the narrator uses this title here while describing the reactions of the other characters, we can assume that the color of Isabel’s skin causes disbelief in the other characters. In this passage, the narrator also references Isabel as the madam; she is called

La Madama twice in this section as well, so we can conclude that she is the only madam attending the event as well. Her profession does have a part in why she does not belong in this space; however, her race obviously takes precedence here because of the focus on her skin tone in the first paragraph of the passage. Women of this color do not belong at an affair as dignified as this one. Even though Isabel is at this event and is dressed the part and is as wealthy as or even wealthier than the other patrons attending the event, she still does not belong here.

Not only does the narrator open *Nuestra señora de la noche* by *othering* of Isabel *la Negra* because of her body in an elegant space, this same idea is reestablished in different parts of the text by *othering* her in a more appropriate space. Luis Arsenio Fornarís, the legitimate son of Isabel's lover, and his friends decide to visit Elizabeth's Dance Hall, Isabel's brothel.

En de aquel salón, una mujer imponente fumaba sentada en un trono de paja. Sus ojos se abrían en dos profundas almendras que vigilaban en lugar, alertas, pero derramándose en cada paisano, en cada pareja que bailaba, en las manos que abrían y cerraban la aja registradora de la barra... Todo lo abarcaban sus ojos. Su piel era azul, azul pantera, azul sombra de ojo hambriento... Tenía la piel tan tersa que era difícil creerla piel. Su cuerpo inquietaba con una cintura minimísima, como unas caderas anchas y pechos mullidos, firmes, sobre el escote pronunciado que anunciaba aquel brillo azul de piel... (Santos-Febres 24).

In this section, Isabel is in a place where she and her black body belong, a brothel. The narrator describes her in full detail and does not have to slowly introduce the reader to the character. The narrator is able to give us a complete description of the protagonist here versus an incomplete description given in the first section because she is not in an extravagant setting; she is in her niche, her habitat.

Here in the brothel *La Negra* with the unbelievably shiny skin is powerful; she sits on her perch and watches her patrons and employees below. Her eyes *se llenaron de un brillo feroz*, and her skin is compared to the coat of a predatory animal, a panther. Comparing her to this animal and describing her eyes as ferocious make Isabel authoritative. The power and strength given to Isabel, debuts in the brothel because she is sexualized; and, there are other examples of the sexualization of her body: “Sabía además que su piel era provocación y que basta mirarla para impresionar a cualquiera...” (24). Since no other physical characteristics are given in this sentence, we can assume that her skin, and her skin alone, is provocative just because it is dark. There is also a detailed description of the shape of her body and her firm breast. The narrator highlights the things that also make her female. We do know that her complexion, however, is the main focus in this description. With the constant referencing of her skin tone, we can assume that her color supersedes all of the other characteristics about her. This is obviously done intentionally to create a distinction between Isabel and the other characters.

In this excerpt the reader is given more details about the characteristics that make Isabel distinctly of African heritage. The narrator gives us another description of her hair. Isabel’s hair is described as *corto, tieso*, which is common in those who are phenotypically African. We also have a description of Isabel’s nose and lips.

“...un rostro de labios carnosos, de nariz diminuta como botón de muñeca...”
(Santos-Febres 25).

The lips and noses of people who are phenotypically African are usually distinctive. The narrator also notes the wideness of her hips and connects this to the color of her skin. We are given these exhaustive details so that we are able to establish who Isabel is.

Negro is used as an identifier because black people are not *normal*. Lighter characters are not called *el blanco* in the novel. The majority of the characters are described by race, eye color and hair texture, but when referencing main characters and background characters that are black, the color is used as somewhat of a title. Starting with the title of the novel, *Nuestra Señora de la noche*, the reader can assume, because of her profession that this title is an identifier for the main character Isabel. Here, *noche* literally means “night,” and because the night is dark, it also references the complexion of Isabel. The narrator of the novel constantly references her skin tone. She is described as having skin that is *azul pantera*, and this complexion is one similar to the color of the night sky. Within the text the reader is able to see the importance of race with the identifiers alone.

Despite this emphasis on skin color, Santos-Febres decolonizes Isabel by giving the character power. An Afro-Puerto Rican woman who takes her life into her own hands creates fear. Many of the white masculine characters are intimidated by Isabel because she is powerful. Inside of her business, Isabel sits high on a makeshift throne, placing herself in a dynamic position. From her throne she is able to look below at the employees and patrons of the dance hall and reign over them like a queen. Her position and demeanor is threatening to the white male patrons, who know the rules of her place. When Luis Arsenio and his friends enter Isabel’s establishment, they have to speak to her. Isabel must be recognized. The young men tremble at the presence of Isabel:

En el manual de buenas maneras que repasaba en su cabeza no cabía fórmula para conversar con señora tan ilegal, ni tan poderosa, ni tan azul... Al muchacho se le volvió a desbocar el corazón. Esteban, Pedrito y Alejo comenzaron a inquietarse, contagiados ellos también con el incómodo pulseo en los ojos de la señora (Santos -Febres 25).

This type of power not only intimidates the three young men, but also threatens the legitimacy of the entire white masculine power structure. The unnamed “enemigo,” in the novel is upset by the audacity of former laundry girl Isabel and wants to take away the land that she built her brothel on, which will take away her power and destroy her. The strong, independent Afro- Puerto Rican woman must be eliminated, and unfortunately, she is eliminated: “Una línea argumental relata que Luberza evoluciona de humilde lavandera a influyente empresaria, soporta las vejaciones de la sociedad blanca y finalmente muere asesinada por un sicario de las elites nacionales” (Irizarry112). Although the reader is not explicitly told who ordered the assassination of Isabel, we can assume that those whose power she threatened worked to end her life.

Not only do we see the inferiority of the Afro- Puerto Rican woman in the language of the narrator, we also see it with other characters and specific situations in the text. The position of Afro-Puerto Rican woman in comparison to masculine figures of European descent in the Puerto Rican society is shown through the treatment of sexual intercourse in the novel. Women of African heritage are, figuratively and actually, on their knees when compared to white men. Luis Arsenio who becomes a man with the help of Minerva, a mulatto woman, later dreams of her. In these extremely realistic dreams, she is positioned below him performing oral sex:

A su vientre henchido se le sumaba una cara oscura, la cara de una mujer negra que lo miraba desde abajo, desde donde la mano hurgaba entre las ropas hasta encontrar aquel pedazo de carne que le cortaba el respire y le ardía (Santos –Febres 61).

In the actual sexual encounters between Luis Arsenio and Minerva he is always atop her. This shows the power of the white man over the black woman sexually and in actual society. Although Isabel is active in deciding the terms of their romantic relationship,

Fernando Fornarís gives in to Isabel's games and decides to have sex with her, he physically overtakes her. Although Isabel wants to have relations with Fernando, he is physically on top of her, he is still in control. As a young girl, the head of the Tous estate Don Aurelio, in a drunken state, forces himself on Isabel: "Sintió cuando Don Aurelio la enlazo por la cintura y la abrazo contra él. Fue un abrazo lento, pero firme..." (98). Don Aurelio physically takes her in, he grabs her and holds her, surrounds her: "Lo hizo todo tan despacio que Isabel se sentía detenida en el aire. Aurelio Tous la levanto en vilo y la deposito sobre el colchón, le quito el camisón, lo tiro al suelo" (98). He has all of the power; he has the ability to control Isabel and the things around them. She does not fight back because she lacks the power to overcome the White masculine figure.

Although Isabel is sexualized because of her gender and skin color, she still is able to resist and loosen the reigns the people of European descent have over her life. Isabel is constantly striving to be more productive and learn more. She did not inherit wealth or status; however, she uses the tools available to her for social mobility. Even though she, who is sexualized by other characters in the novel, plays a huge part in reproducing the sexualization and oppression of women and their bodies by establishing a brothel and working as a madam, she manipulates this disadvantage to succeed. Instead of working as a washerwoman or as a house servant for the elite of European descent like many of the other black, female figures we see in the text, she builds a business. She no longer has to worry about losing employment as she did before, because she controls almost every aspect of her life and body. Isabel takes advantage of her oppression and overcomes poverty.

As madam, Isabel reinforces the idea that female bodies are for pleasuring men; however, there are few other options available to her. While selling women by the hour, she is still able to treat her employees respectfully as well as provide things to them that would not usually be available.

Female characters from affluent families still face discrimination because, even with education or wealth, these characters are still black and female. This idea is reinforced with the interactions between characters of African descent and European descent. Afro-Puerto Rican characters that are or come from “decent” or educated families are still rejected because of their color. Isabel becomes very wealthy after opening her brother, Elizabeth’s Dance Hall, but she is still out of place when she is around her white counterparts. The affluent, white guest and even people working at the casino are surprised to see her at the event:

Un botones abrió la puerta y ofreció la mano para ayudar a la elegante dama que de seguro se bajaría de aquel carruaje lujoso. No se esperaba la mano enguantada que en su muñeca llevaba un semanario de oro macizo al que le colgaba una medallita de la Virgen de la Caridad. Tampoco se esperaba que aquel guante dejara ver, a la altura del codo, un brazo duro, negro... (Santos – Febres 1).

They are stunned by her presence and make her feel uncomfortable with their eyes. It could be argued that the other guests at the event held by La Cruz Rosa look at her in this fashion because of her occupation, but characters from well to do families are outcasts as well.

The reader is provided with another example of this with mention of the Tomás family in a conversation between Virginia and Isabel. The patriarch of the Tomás family is a medical doctor; however, the doctor’s title does not set his children a part from other, less educated, Puerto Ricans of African descent. When Virginia sees Isabel talking to the Tomás

daughters at school during recess, she tells Isabel, “Y que no te coja yo hablando con esas de nuevo. Mamá dijo que no frecuentara a la gentuza de los Tomé...” (Santo-Febres 81). These children are still considered as “trash.” This creates a further separates profession, family and wealth as influencing factors from the oppression imposed on Afro- Puerto Rican females. Neither education nor wealth separates Afro-Puerto Rican characters from their blackness, they are still isolated from their white counterparts. Color dictates how people are treated on the island.

Not only does black skin make Afro-Puerto Ricans different, it makes them dirty. White characters are afraid that their things or they themselves are in danger of being stained by the skin of the Afro-Puerto Ricans. Anything that the Afro-Puerto Rican woman touches is soiled, not because she actually is dirty, but because her flesh makes her appear dirty. When Isabel’s godmother Maruca takes her to the Tous estate and Doña Georgina, the matriarch of the house, takes her in, she tells Lorenza, the other servant, “...ve preparando la tina. A esta niña hay que darle un baño antes de que me ensucie la casa entera” (Santos-Febres 51). Not only does Doña Georgina fear that black skin has the potential to dirty her house, Virginia, her daughter, does not want Isabel to touch her quinceañera dress because Black women have the potential to ruin everything they touch.

Even male characters that choose to have sex with Afro-Puerto Rican woman feel soiled after intercourse. Luis Arsenio, by his own free will, decides to have sex with Minerva, but feels disgusting afterwards.

Quería lavarse con lejía el cuerpo entero. Quería quitarse de encima el aroma de la mujer. Con el aroma desaparecería el recuerdo del tacto, del peso de sus piernas contra la espalda, la tibieza de su entrepierna tragando selo entero (Santos –Febres 29).

It can be argued that he wanted to rid himself of the sweat and smell of Minerva because she is a sex worker, but during his encounter with the prostitute, the narrator focuses more on the physical characteristics that make her mulatto.

This parallels to Afro-Puerto Rican women ruining the white man. An encounter with a darker-skinned woman forever changes the white man. It creates an unquenchable thirst:

Allá va comenzar con el rito de siempre, a comerse su primera mulata, negra, para después intentar dejarla atrás. Allá va a que la carne se le parta en dos, su deseo en dos, lo presiente. Por un lado los afectos verdaderos, por otro el miedo a lo que su cuerpo le pide (332).

Luis is constantly searching for something or someone to fill his hunger for the *mulata* woman. This is cyclic for Fornarís men. Throughout the novel there seems to be something “off” about Fernando. He appears empty, he is lost after his relations with Isabel. Luis

Arsenio realizes that there is an awkwardness, aloofness with his father:

Luis Arsenio recordó el día exacto en que lo empezó a notar. Tendría no más de nueve años... Fernando Fornarís se quitó el sombrero, lo colgó del gancho habitual, respire profundo. Se restregó los ojos brevemente. Abrió los ojos de nuevo, pestañeando. Miraba la estancia de lo que era su hogar. Sus ojos no eran de él; las cosas de aquella casa no eran suyas (18-19).

He is out of place in his own space, in his own body. He also seems lost to his wife. In her prayers to the Virgin Mary, Cristina asks her to bring her husband back to her because he is physically there, but not mentally Isabel has ruined him.

Not only do darker-skinned women soil things and people, they are scapegoats for the sins of men, white and black. There is no guilt for men in this society; they are never responsible for their wrongdoings and sexual escapades. All women, regardless of color, are responsible for keeping men virtuous: “La mujer debe ser cuna de virtud, espejo de moral, sosten de la familia. Esposas, ayudan a sus maridos a no desviarse por las sendas de la carne” (Santos –Febres 289). Although the Bishop does not assign this message to a

specific race of women, it is the burden of the Afro-Puerto Rican woman not to tempt the man. Santo-Febres uses Isabel to illustrate this idea. Early on in Isabel's life her body tempts Mariano Moreno, Maruca's brother. Even though she is small, she catches Mariano's eye, and when he is confronted by his sister because of the way he looks at her, he blames Isabel for his lustful eye. Maruca eventually has to remove Isabel from the house because of Mariano's tendencies. She is put out of the house as a preventive measure. This is done to protect Isabel, but it proves how powerless the Afro-Puerto Rican woman is in comparison to her male counterpart. Instead of insisting that Mariano, the culpable one, leaves the house, they send away Isabel, who is at the time very small. In her adolescence Isabel's body tempts Don Aurelio during her service at the Tous estate. Instead of correcting her husband for preying on Isabel, a young servant that is around his daughter's age, Doña Georgina wants to find different clothing for Isabel. She prefers that Isabel wear something more fitting for a servant girl because it is very unlikely that the uniform will hug Isabel's curves, like the old dresses of Virginia, and it will also reestablish Isabel's role in the house as a servant, not a lady of the house.

In her adulthood Isabel is also responsible for the sexual immorality of all of the wealthy men in her city. She is blamed for ruining families, taking husbands away from wives and children because she owns Elizabeth's Dance Hall. Because she provides the spaces and profits from the sins of the influential men that frequent her establishment, the Church and the community hold Isabel, instead of the patrons, accountable for these sins: "La peste era ella, una plaga" (296). The Bishop spends a Sunday Mass making Isabel and her employees criminals. Members of the congregation react to this accordingly. Women grab on to the arms of their husbands, and men avoid looking at Isabel. This demonstrates

that not only are Afro-Puerto Rican women responsible for their own actions, they are also responsible for keeping men and their intentions pure.

Just the sight of the *mulata*, Black woman draws in the white masculine figure. It seems as if all of the Afro-Puerto Rican woman's power lies in between her legs, and because of this they are sexualized. When Luis Arsenio thinks of sex, he thinks of Minerva. In the novel he dreams of the mulatto prostitute to whom he gave his virginity, but in some of his fantasies it is not Minerva specifically:

“Déjame en paz, déjame aquí tirado sonar que una negra me chupa entre las piernas” (Santos –Febres 63).

The reader can assume that Luis Arsenio is thinking of Minerva, but the use of “una negra” can mean any darker-skinned woman. The use of the indefinite article here could also point out the lack of importance to identify exactly who the “negra” is. Luis Arsenio begins to fantasize about Maggie, the American red-head classmate he has relations with while in law school, but then tells himself that Maggie is too white, too pure to think of in this context:

Maggie Carlisle. Luis Arsenio se sorprendió pensando cuan caliente podría ser el contacto de aquellas mejillas que deglutían, cuan febril el roce de sus labios, cuanto podrían aliviarle el hambre que tenía metida en el alma. Pero no, imposible. Esas cosas no se piensan de muchachas tan finas (143).

He cannot degrade Maggie physically or even in his mind. In contrast to his sexual relationship with Minerva, all of the details are explicitly given to the reader. Luis Arsenio does not penetrate Maggie, he kisses her, and he does not blemish her white purity. The same respect is not given to Minerva because she is mulatto, dark, already tarnished.

Although the Afro-Puerto Rican female are suitable sex partners, the black women in the novel are not good enough or proper enough for relationships with white masculine

characters outside of the bedroom. When Luis Arsenio is seen on the street trying to approach Minerva, it is a disgrace:

“Ahí va el hijo del Ledo. Fornarís...”

“¿Que hace con esa mulata?”

“Esa niña trabaja en el bar de Isabel la Negra.”

“Bendito, tan joven y puta.”

“Es que la juventud de hoy no tiene decencia...” (64).

Luis Arsenio hears the chatter around him and stops himself from approaching her. He comes to his senses and realizes that she is not good enough for him, not only because she is a prostitute, but because she is Black. Minerva is good enough to fulfill his sexual cravings, but she will never be enough status to be taken seriously. He tells himself that when he finds a girlfriend, she will be what Minerva is not, a proper, suitable girlfriend.

In *Nuestra señora de la noche* Santos-Febres recreates the power struggle between Puerto Ricans and Euro-Americans. Through Luis Arsenio's romantic relationship with Maggie, Santos-Febres highlights the superiority complex of Euro-Americans. Although he is a part of the dominant racial group in Puerto Rico, he is *othered* on the mainland. Historically, we know that this is not an uncommon occurrence for Puerto Rican people who interact with Euro-Americans. Even if they are white, upper class Puerto Ricans, they are still inferior to the Euro-American. Despite spending time with Luis Arsenio and building a relationship with him, Maggie does not even bother to learn how to properly pronounce his name. She Americanizes the Luis and calls him Louie. Although she is romantically involved with Luis Arsenio, Maggie does not take their relationship seriously and hides their relationship because Luis Arsenio is Puerto Rican. “Además, ¿cómo iba yo a presentarte a mi familia? Hola, este es Louis Forneress from some island” (Santos-Febres 228).

Nuestra Señora de la noche presents to the readers the trials of being an Afro- Puerto Rican woman in the post-colonial society. Santos-Febres uses an actual black, historical figure as the protagonist to prove the authenticity of the Afro-Puerto Rican struggle. In this effort, she decolonizes by using an Afro-Puerto Rican woman as a protagonist in an artistic space and by creating an Afro-Puerto Rican character that is multidimensional. Santos-Febres does not give her protagonist the opportunity to escape a life of domestic work or sex work, but through this novel she reveals the reality of how Black women during this time period were limited to these options. These were the means that they had to survive. Even though it may seem that Santos-Febres is reestablishing negative stereotypes of Afro-Puerto Rican women by focusing on a black madam who sold other women for sex, she uses this novel as a testament of the strength and perseverance of the Afro-Puerto Rican woman. Isabel *la negra* uses the options available to her to survive and succeed.

This novel specifically presents to the world the suffering of the Black woman by creating a color-based hierarchy through description and narrative perspective. The use of symbols like religious figures helps to make clear contrasts between those who are white and proper and those of African heritage. Through the narrator we see the othering of people of color, specifically the Afro-Puerto Rican woman and *mulata*. The descriptions of the women from different racial backgrounds also reveal the societal preference for fairer women.

The Black woman—oppressed because of her body in its entirety—has very few options for social mobility. Although she is the most limited in terms of social status in her patriarchal society, she is culpable for the sins of all men, white and black, and is solely responsible for the demise of man. Our protagonist, wealthy and feared by many, is able to

succeed financially because she found the means to obtain wealth; however, she does not overcome the restrictions that limit her based on her ethnic make-up because her fortune could not change her identity.

The novel concludes with the death of Isabel. Her end is sudden and violent; she is shot outside of her dance hall. Although the actual Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer dies in the same fashion, it is still important to ask why Santos-Febres chose not to alter the Isabel's fate in the novel. The narrator does not tell the reader who is responsible for the crime; however, it would be feasible to assume that her assassination was carried out by someone who felt threatened by her power. Those who were threatened by her wealth and her potential were not other marginalized, powerless people, but people who wanted to maintain their own status. The same people responsible for Isabel's success—white males—eventually took her down. A Black woman with this amount of money and influence threatens the patriarchal society.

Chapter 3. Black Skin, No Mask: Connecting the Afro-Puerto Rican Woman in *La amante de Gardel* to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and Ahmed's Stranger Theory

La amante de Gardel, the most recent novel from Mayra Santos-Febres, recounts the twenty-seven-day romance between Micaela Thorné, a Black nursing student from a small Puerto Rican pueblo, and the famous Argentine singer Carlos Gardel. Although Micaela narrates this love story well after the events take place in the 1930's, with the extremely detailed descriptions, the reader is still able to follow along as if Micaela were telling her tale as it actually happened. While she reflects, the reader witnesses Micaela encounter the racial discrimination that Afro-Puerto Rican people commonly faced during this time period. Micaela's racial make-up has a huge impact on her day-to-day life including her schooling and her romantic relationship with Gardel. The novel is framed around a pivotal time in Micaela's life. She is finishing her studies and starting a research internship with a renowned doctor; however, we do not learn a great deal about Micaela's accomplishments. Her love affair with Carlos Gardel overshadows her professional endeavors in this tale. Concepts developed by post-colonial theorist Sara Ahmed and Frantz Fanon enlighten the way that Santos-Febres portrays Micaela in the novel as living in this in between space of accepting her unique Afro- Puerto Rican identity and trying to transcend the social stigma that comes along with being a black female on the island. In this chapter I will analyze Micaela's character as the *Other* in this fictional 1930's Puerto Rico society by using Sara Ahmed's notion of the *stranger*, and examine the ways in which she tries to overcome the stigma of being the *stranger* without neglecting the foundations of her Afro-Puerto Rican identity. Because Micaela is in an interracial relationship, I will also consider Micaela's affair with Gardel in light of Frantz Fanon's ideas in *Black Skin, White Masks* on accepting one's blackness and interracial relationships.

It is important to note that the effects of the colonization of black and brown people by the Spanish are evident in the text, but the effects of neo-colonization and American influence are also present and affect the settings and portrayal of characters in the novel. It is impossible to separate the effects of Spanish colonization of Puerto Rico from the Puerto Rican national identity; however, the focus on the neo-colonization by the United States is more present in this text. *La amante de Gardel* critiques the neo-colonization and othering of not only Afro-Puerto Rican people, but all Puerto Ricans through references through attempts at population control through sterilization and birth control.

In her work *Consuming the Caribbean*, Mimi Sheller focuses on ways in which people —people that are phenotypically European —have used the resources and people of the Caribbean islands to their advantage. Since their “discovery” of the New World, colonizers, and the generations of white people after them, have been using the assets available to them in the Caribbean. Plants, other natural resources and the knowledge of indigenous people played a huge part in the survival of the colonizers in the tropical climate in the Caribbean. Not only did the colonizers reap the benefits of these resources, those who lived in their home countries benefited from them as well. These “discoveries” played a part in bettering the quality of life for these white men, but ruined the quality of life for the indigenous people of the Caribbean: their populations were depleted.

This concept of consumption is especially useful in analyzing *La amante de Gardel*. Because this story takes place well after the Spanish American War, we do not see the original colonizers directly consuming the resources of Puerto Rico. The reader sees the neo-colonizers consuming these unique resources. American doctors from prestigious

American universities are seeking out native plants and African-derived healing techniques for the sake of science. This research is done at the expense of the Puerto Rican people. The doctors in the novel consume more than plants and ideas, they consume the Puerto Rican bodies as well.

In studying the extensive work of Ahmed on the *Stranger* and *Strangeness*, we learn that one finds ways to identify and separate him or herself from who Ahmed refers to as the *stranger*. Ahmed explains that the shell that we refer to as the body functions to isolate the contents inside of the body and protect these contents from potential dangers outside of the body. When referencing the body, Ahmed makes it clear that she is not only referring to the physical body, but also a societal body consisting of separate but interconnected bodies. The group that I refer to as the standard societal body through the duration of this chapter is made up of white, middle-class, heterosexual men. This body functions as a barrier that keeps the individual bodies that make up this societal body together as well as keep the *stranger* out.

According to Ahmed, a *stranger* is someone who is not actually unknown, but someone that is recognized as not belonging in a specific setting. It is not that we are not familiar with the person who we identify as the *stranger*; we recognize this person and realize that this person is out of place (Ahmed 19). Once we are able to see the *stranger* and establish that this foreign body has entered a prohibited space, the stranger is too close and poses a threat to the bodies that are not prohibited from accessing this space. In Santos-Febres' novel we see several examples of *strangers* being denied access to places designed for members of the societal body.

Ahmed also makes it clear that there are varying degrees of *strangeness*. If what we refer to as the societal body is made up of white, heterosexual, middle-class males, any other body is *strange*, but some bodies are *stranger* than others. White women from the middle-class, for example may not be considered as *strange* as black, lower class women. Because we only encounter incidents in which there are two extremes, black and white, in *La amante de Gardel*, we do not have the opportunity to examine how other strangers are treated by the societal body.

In the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon establishes that this text is his attempt to awaken the black individual, particularly the black male, and make him aware that he has suffered and still suffers the consequences of being a former colonized subject. The case of Puerto Rico is unique but in some ways similar to the status of Fanon's home country of Martinique, which remains a French territory. Even after the Spanish left the island, the people of the nation did not gain control over Puerto Rico; the power was transferred to the United States. The Puerto Ricans essentially became colonized subjects again. Fanon's ideas, although they are specifically aimed at the black male, can be applied to black women as well; and Fanon does dedicate a chapter to black women. He believes that the internal issues caused by colonialism cause black individuals to struggle in every aspect of their lives. From his use of language to his romantic relationships, the black individual's inferiority complex affects his behavior and personal belief system. According to Fanon, the ultimate goal of the black man is to be white because the act of being white is a status. People of color cannot physically change their racial identity; however, they try to attain whiteness using methods that raise their status or position in their societies, for example, international study or proper usage of the language. This causes a rift between

who the black or brown individual actually is versus the whiter person he or she projects to society. Fanon believes that black people are no longer physical slaves, but are slaves to their own inferiority complexes; and Fanon wants to liberate the black man from himself.

Fanon dedicates the second chapter of the text to black women in romantic relationships with white men. According to Fanon, authentic love is impossible when one of the partners, the black woman, is inferior to the other partner, the white man. Because non-black groups of people have dominated society throughout history and currently dominate society, this is usually the case. Fanon's second chapter is a response to Mayotte Capécia's *I am a Martinician Woman*. In her work Capécia writes about her romantic relationship with a white man; and it appears to Fanon that her unconditional love for this man is solely based on his race. He argues that even though white men do not marry the black women with whom they have sexual relationships, and although these black women that they see are not allowed in certain spaces with them, black women are drawn to white men because they believe that in these interracial relationships they will elevate their status. Fanon believes that Capécia and other likeminded black women date white men in attempt to become socially white and physically whiten the race later down the line through a process he calls lactification.

If we read into the strong ideas of Fanon too deeply, we can easily fall into a trap of believing that any person of color in a relationship with someone of European descent or adapting to some aspects of white culture is neglecting his or her heritage and trying to transcend their black and/or colored identity. In *La amante de Gardel* we have the portrayal of a black female character that learns to mix facets of her identity that are a part

of her African heritage with the societal expectations created by the former colonizers and use these things to her advantage. Even though she has a relationship with a white man, lactification is not an issue here as she is not attracted to him based solely on his race nor do we see Micaela making any plans to reproduce with Gardel. The protagonist realizes that she is at a disadvantage because of her race; she understands that she is a *stranger*. She does attempt to reconcile this by following the rules and by meeting the expectations established by the societal body. In her attempts, she works on transcending her situation not her skin color.

Although Fanon's ideas on interracial relationships are somewhat extreme, some of his other ideas are appropriate for analyzing how Micaela looks at the world around her. Fanon realizes that in the eyes of the dominant he is a black man, not a man. In the section "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," Fanon establishes how black people actually become black. Darker skin and curlier hair do not actually make the phenotypically African man black, his environment does. If a man of African descent is around people that are phenotypically like him, he is just a man. When he changes his environment, or when his environment is changed for him, and the Other is the dominant group, his color becomes permanently attached to his gender and becomes the most important piece of his identity. The black cannot be separated from the man. Because his color cloaks all other qualities, the black man becomes victim to the white gaze. If one views the world through a white gaze lens, the black man becomes a spectacle and becomes something to fear. The black man's gaze and the ways in which he perceives every aspect of life around him is in response to the white gaze. Even though, Fanon is speaking from his own point of view as a black man, these same ideas are applicable to our protagonist Micaela. She is aware that

she is a victim to this white gaze, and this has some effect on her thought processes and her interactions with others.

In addition to the white gaze in general, the United States' influence on Puerto Rico is one of the key components that causes othering in *La amante de Gardel*. The presence of American influence is strong in the novel and it appears through a mixture of things native to the island and foreign things such as American cars: "La doctora se bajó de su Ford, que dejó estacionado debajo de un árbol de mango" (Santos-Febres 80). In this excerpt Dr. Martha Roberts visits Mano Santa and Micaela in their pueblo to talk about a magic plant. This American car is parked underneath a mango tree creates the image of a tropical America. Not only are American made cars like Ford and Cadillac mentioned in the novel, there are American characters who have important roles in Micaela's story. All of the doctors in the novel are natives of the United States and studied medicine at American universities.

Because of the American presence and power over the island, the United States sets a standard. When Micaela recounts that day at school, we see that being able to use English is required for studying at La Escuela de Medicina Tropical, a Puerto Rican school. After looking at Micaela and reviewing her grades, the registrar asks her about her ability to understand English. "¿Y qué tal anda en inglés? Porque todos los libros de esta Escuela son en inglés. No sé si sabes, muchacha" (Santos-Febres 43). Even though this is a Puerto Rican school for Puerto Rican students, we are able to see the level of influence the United States has over the island. Not only are the books in English, all of the doctors mentioned in relation to the school are all from the United States. Requiring English could also be a

mechanism used to exclude certain groups of students. This practice is oppressive and could have been designed to exclude students who, like Micaela, are from poorer, smaller parts of the island. Being able to study with these American doctors is an opportunity given to those who are privileged enough to have the tools for learning and maintaining English.

It is also important to consider the purpose of tropical medicine. According to Laura Briggs tropical medicine was instituted to protect colonial populations and armies from venereal disease (Briggs 34). Imperial powers associated diseases like syphilis with the tropics and the prostitutes that lived and worked there (38). Instead of blaming the white men—usually military men—for bringing back venereal diseases to their innocent wives and children back in their home countries, governments made colonized women the scapegoats. Because these men were victimized and colonized women were made culprits, tropical medicine also worked as an agent to further separate the colonizer from the colonized (38).

Not only is there a mixture of American culture and Puerto Rican culture, the most important component of American influence is the consumption portrayed in the novel. These American doctors and researchers have come to the island in an effort to create contraceptives. The first thing that the American doctors consume is the flora and fauna plant. Dr. Roberts believes that there are plants on the island that, if used in the right dosage, would prevent pregnancy. The research goes on further to consume Puerto Rican people as well. There is more than one example in the novel that includes medical doctors using Puerto Rican people as subjects in their research. The first example provided to us in the novel explicitly states that Puerto Rican people were used because the doctor Cornelius

Rhoads thought they were subhuman: “Los puertorriqueños, sin lugar a dudas, son las más sucios, vagos, degenerados y ladrones de todas las razas humana que habitan este hemisferio” (Santos-Febres 170). Although this letter mention seems too harsh to be authentic, this excerpt comes from an actual letter written by Dr. Rhoads after he performed cáncer research using Puerto Rican subjects. Students and professors at Micaela’s school discussed the issues with this letter –which written three years before – and this way of thinking. Even though they are having this discussion at la Escuela de Medicina Tropical, these doctors are still using Puerto Rican people as the subjects for their research.

By focusing on the United States’ involvement in women and reproduction Santos-Febres mirrors real issues in her fictional text. During the 20th century—1920 through 1940—it was believed that overpopulation in Puerto Rico was caused by poverty (Briggs 74). The government believed that smaller families would be best for Puerto Rico, so tropical medicine also played a role in providing contraceptives to less educated women and sterilizing them to reduce the high population of hunger, homelessness and lack of education on the island (77).

Because the novel takes place in earlier parts of the twentieth century, the reader must keep in mind that in the United States segregation was not prohibited by law and was encouraged during this time period. From the colonization of Puerto Rico until this time, colonizers and the white men that descended from these colonizers established and enforced the laws in ways that worked to their advantage and the advantage of people that resembled them. Although the Spanish left in 1898, power was transferred to a new

colonial power, the United States. There were no actual laws that excluded people of different races from occupying certain places on the island (Blanco 35). Since the physical settings in the plot were often spaces in which outsiders—people from the United States and other foreigners—frequented, like the hotel; we can assume that the influence on Puerto Rico from the United States may have played a part in the segregation portrayed in the novel. Like in the United States, some physical spaces in *La amante de Gardel* Puerto Rico were not accessible to black and/or colored individuals and a portion of the spaces that were inhabitable by white and black and/or colored people, only provided limited access to the latter. Deciding who could and could not occupy physical spaces was a successful attempt at physically keeping those who were not white away from the societal body. It is possible that this body believed that denying access to people of color helped them to create a barrier protecting them from potential danger; but, it would be also fair and logical to assume that the motive behind keeping *strangers* out of particular places was to distinguish the societal body from the *strangers* and reestablish the idea that they—as white men—were elite and had privileges that non-white people could not afford. White people took ownership and policed these spaces, and because they literally controlled who went where and when, they ultimately policed the non-white bodies that they identified as *strangers*. Santos-Febres makes segregation a significant part of *La amante de Gardel*. In her portrayal of segregation, it becomes evident that characters of color are treated like *strangers* on the island that they have inhabited for their entire lives. These characters portrayed in the text are recognized as *strangers* based on their skin color and their skin color alone.

Before we establish that skin color is the main qualifying factor that makes a person a *stranger* in the novel, we must examine other factors that could potentially cause the societal body to recognize one who is different as a *stranger*. The novel suggests that being of foreign origin has no influence one's recognition as a *stranger*. Although Carlos Gardel is from Europe and grew up in South America, while he is in Puerto Rico he is still treated as someone who belongs. He is a part of the societal body despite being an actual foreign body on the island. He is not denied access into certain spaces nor does his presence cause alarm and he still benefits from the privileges afforded for white men. The qualities that make him a part of the societal body are universal and do not lose value as he travels to different areas around the world. He, an actual stranger, is granted access to spaces in Puerto Rico that some actual Puerto Rican people cannot access because the Afro-Puerto Ricans are *strangers* in their own space.

Not only does being *strange* prevent people of color from entering certain spaces, it also causes their practices to be perceived as barbaric. Clementina de los Llanos Yabó or Mano Santa, the grandmother of the protagonist Micaela, uses the knowledge passed down to her from her ancestors to heal. Not only does the reader see her perform gynecological procedures in the novel, we also learn that she has created some type of contraceptive with a magical mushroom. Mano Santa's talents are well known all over the island, which is why she is recruited to help cure Gardel of his illness. Even though she did not receive any formal training, she is able to perform some of the same procedures as licensed medical doctors and even knows more than they do. The methods of Mano Santa do not follow the model created by white society in which a body of knowledge is passed down through educational institutions. They were not taught through school or with science.

Everything she learned was passed down, inherited from her ancestors. Even though her methods are unconventional in the eyes of the societal body, white people still reach out to Mano Santa because they need her expertise.

Even though these procedures are effective for Mano Santa, there is a need to standardize it, make it more scientific, whiter. Micaela's mentor Dr. Martha Roberts tries to "collaborate" with her for new birth control techniques. Dr. Martha reaches out to Mano Santa because she wants to know the secrets of this mushroom. In this "collaboration" we have a white, foreign body attempting to use or consume the plant to benefit her science; she also needs to use Mano Santa's dosages in order to use the mushroom effectively. This is Dr. Marta's attempt at consuming the knowledge of the old healer as well as the plant. Fortunately, Mano Santa is suspicious of the doctor and others like her, believing that the woman only "quiere y quiere" (Santos-Febres 75).

The consumption of knowledge and skill of African descended people is mirrored in the case of Ricardo, *el Negro*, a talented guitarist that is hired to perform in Gardel's band. Although he cannot write, he is able to make remarkable music through alternative methods. After he is recruited by the band, Ricardo works with them to create a song. It is evident to the reader that he leads the creative process; however, his band mates take the credit. If we consider the time period in which the story takes place, this is not something very hard to believe. People of color did not have the same access to education as their white counterparts. Because he cannot write, he does not measure up to the expectations set by the societal body; he is inferior to his band-mates. When he does try to work with the band to make music, they write down his ideas, but try to pass them off as their own

because they physically wrote the words down. In this way, societal body takes advantage of the *flaw* of stranger.

There are instances in the novel where the privilege of white male characters extends to people who are not a part of their societal body, *strangers*. Since she is a young black woman from a *pueblo* working as a nurse to the famous singer, we witness Micaela do things that she was not previously entitled enough to experience. Even though white men work diligently to keep others away from their body, they will allow others to come around when it is beneficial to them. After searching extensively for someone to cure Gardel's illness, his team seeks out help from the well-known healer Mano Santa, Micaela's grandmother. Since they need services that only this woman can provide, they grant her and her granddaughter access to inhabit their space. They are picked up in nice cars and invited to their exclusive hotel because they absolutely need la Mano Santa. This experience which gives the women a taste of the benefits of being white, changes Micaela, and she starts to see a different world when she receives small doses of this privilege:

Enfilamos hacia la avenida Ponce de León, saliendo del barrio de Campo Alegre. La gran maquina Cadillac me mostraba la ciudad desde un nueva perspectiva, la que ofrece una nave moviéndose sobre un río de brea; andaba lejos, protegida por la carrocería de metal que me alejaba del <<resto>> (Santos-Febres 22).

Not only does she have a new perspective, she goes to places she has never been. Even though she is still in Campo Alegre, because she is with these white men in their Cadillac, she goes to the other side that she has never had access to:

Cruzamos la frontera con las quintas del Condado, proyecto de los hermanos Behn, que construyeron ricas mansiones a la orilla del mar. Cerca de esas mansiones se levantaban hoteles para turistas, grandes paseos, casinos malecones junto a las playas. Ese era el otro lado de Campo Alegre, tan solo

separado por una carretera... Era como cruzar al otro lado del mundo (22-23).

Allowing others around their societal body on a come and go basis proves that they were not keeping others out to protect them from potential danger, but they were denying access to people because they wanted to reinforce the idea that they were elite. This also reinforces the idea that white men can upgrade their lives. Having a white person around is beneficial, but it is important to also keep in mind that in every relationship seen in the novel between people of European descent and people of African ancestry, the dominant group uses the other group to its advantage.

In *La amante de Gardel* there are several instances where our protagonist Micaela tries to inhabit physical spaces that were prohibited to her based on her skin color. The readers do not have to assume that her skin color plays a part in granting or denying Micaela access in certain spaces, it is obvious. When invited to the hotel to heal Gardel, Mano Santa and Micaela are denied access to the hotel, and a hotel employee tells their party exactly why the women were not allowed:

Tomé el brazo de mi abuela. Nos dispusimos a emprender caminos tras el muchacho. Enseguida, oímos la voz del administrador a nuestras espaldas.

-Disculpen, pero ellas no pueden entrar.

-¿Cómo? –preguntó Plaja a la vez que Cobián respondía, rudo:

-Muchacho, vamos a dejarnos de idioteces. Tenemos que atender un asunto de urgencia.

-Son las reglas del hotel, señores. Aquí hay invitados extranjeros que no están acostumbrados a cruzarse con...-hizo una pausa- gente de color por la estancia. (Santos-Febres 27).

The two women are denied access because they are black. Even though they accompany white men and they are there for a purpose, the rules of the hotel do not allow them to enter. The administrator goes on to tell the group that black people are not allowed in common areas of the hotel unless they work there. Eventually, the two women are allowed in to the hotel, but they have to enter through a secluded, maze like entrance. Not only do they have to enter through the shadows and darkness because they cannot be seen, but the path that they have to take is an unnecessarily complex one.

While taking this complicated route to enter the hotel, Micaela notices the number of black and brown employees at the hotel.

Cruzamos la lavandería y las cocinas del hotel entre tubos expuestos, vapors del fregado, sobras de comida, olor a polvo y a humedad. Una multitud de manos trajinaba sin descanso recogiendo basura, restos de almuerzos y desayunos, los excrementos de la mil digestiones que ocurrían en las tripas del hotel. Decenas de rostros turbios; rostros de negros, mulatos, rostros pálidos y blancos nos miraron con desconfianza a mi abuela y a mí, a la insigne Mano Santa y a su acompañante (27).

Because she sees black and mulatto people working at the hotel, we can conclude that black people are allowed to be in that particular space, but only if it is obvious that they are not patrons of the hotel. In this instance, people of color are allowed in the hotel, but only if they work there; they have no other role. This creates the idea that people in this societal body are not threatened by *strangers* when the inferiority of the *stranger* is evident; *strangers* are servants. When the administrator explains why people of color are not otherwise allowed in the hotel, he tells them it is because there are patrons of the hotel who are not accustomed to crossing paths with people of color. It is done to protect the privilege of the white travelers that visit the hotel from black individuals.

We also see another example of Micaela being treated as a *stranger* after she begins touring the island with Gardel and his group. It is obvious to Micaela and the readers that Ramos Cobián, one of the business people for Gardel's musical group, did not like her. In his opinion, she did not belong on the tour. In some instances, his body language expresses how he feels about Micaela being on tour with the band. After everyone takes ill during the tour, Micaela goes out to find an herb to cure them of their gastrointestinal issues. After Micaela makes this medicinal tea, Ramos Cobián decides not to drink the tea even if it would help alleviate his symptoms. At that moment he does not explicitly tell her why he does not want to drink the tea; however, the look he gives Micaela when she offers the tea to everyone is an uncomfortably familiar one:

Entonces me miró hosco. No que fuera una Mirada distinta a las que de tanto en tanto yo estaba acostumbrada a recibir. Me miró como lo hacían las muchachas en la Escuela de Medicina, algunos médicos. Me miró como siempre lo hacen los empresarios a las mujeres o a las negras (Santos-Febres 136).

Because Micaela is a black woman, she is familiar with looks like these. It is the white gaze. In this excerpt she mentions receiving these looks from classmates and some doctors. It is clear that looks like these are common occurrences, they are uncomfortable enough to notices, but she is accustomed to them now.

Not only does Ramos Cobián look at her differently, he explicitly tells her that she does not belong on tour with them in a separate incident. He walks in to the hotel room that Micaela shared with Gardel, and while Gardel was not there, he tells her:

-Mira, negra –me dijo-. Yo siempre me opuse a que Gardel te trajera de perrito faldero a acompañarle la cama mientras terminaba la gira. Das mala imagen. Imagínate, el gran Gardel–Ramos Cobián hizo una pausa; torció la

boca en una mueca irónica-, contigo del brazo. Esto no es París ni Nueva York. Esto es pueblo chiquito (Santos-Febres 137).

First, it is important to look at the identifier here, *negra*. Although it is common in the Spanish language to use *negro* or *negra* as an identifier when referencing black individuals, Cobián strategically uses this identifier here. We as readers can connect any of the statements made after Ramos Cobián uses this identifier to Micaela's race. In his statement he clarifies Micaela's role on this tour: she is a lapdog there to accompany Gardel in bed. Even though she nurses him when he suffers from the symptoms of his illness, she is primarily there as a sex object or a pet. She has no significance. It could be argued that a man with Gardel's fame has a plethora of lovers and does not take any of them seriously; however, Cobián believes that the idea of Gardel and Micaela arm and arm would destroy the image of the group. This could be connected back to her race and her *strangeness*. She, a *negra*, does not belong alongside a man as great as Gardel. Although the dynamics of her relationship with Fornarís are different, Isabel from *Nuestra senora de la noche* is a victim to this as well. It does appear that Attorney Fornarís is genuine in his feelings for Isabel; however, she is not allowed to be more than a sexual partner. With this sexual relationship between Gardel and Micaela, the reader becomes aware that the societal body does not protect itself from *strange* bodies in the instance of sex. It is permissible to have *strange* bodies as sex partners.

Due to the long history of colonization, former colonized people, especially those of African heritage, have had to live between their identities and the expectations of white society. A large majority of people of color in the Americas has lost important pieces of

their ancestry; they have no other option other than to fully embrace the culture of their former colonizers. If they do not completely clothe themselves in the culture of white people, they do have to adopt a large portion of white culture. People of color usually speak European languages and follow societal rules provided to them by people of European descent; however, they are never fully accepted by these people in return because even if they are socially white, they are not physically white. Because this causes black people to feel inferior, Fanon believes that the ultimate goal of the black individual is to mask the things that make him unique and become white. We should evaluate if Fanon's ideas are applicable to Micaela. In the novel, Micaela struggles to achieve her goals under similar circumstances and one can question whether or not she betrays her heritage in the process.

First, it is helpful to examine why Micaela is telling us her story. It is important to note that the story is told in the first person. Micaela is telling her tale; she is leading the reader as opposed to an omnipresent narrator who is detached from the plot. Since we have Micaela's story from her own perspective, we can assume that she is narrating this particular story because it has some value in her life. In the first few lines of the novel, Micaela makes us aware that she, even as a young woman, was somewhat accomplished:

Mi nombre es Micaela Thorné y soy una mujer que recuerda. Antes fui muchas cosas. Fui una joven estudiante de enfermería. Fue la nieta de una vieja curandera. La protegida de la doctora Martha Roberts de Rameu. También fue la amante de Gardel (Santos-Febres 11).

For our protagonist, this affair was unforgettable. Even though she mentions her position as Gardel's lover last on her list, being Gardel's love is just as significant as the other roles listed. One could argue that Micaela is telling us this story because she, like Mayotte

Capécia, is obsessed with the idea of being in a relationship with a white man. Micaela's love affair with Gardel is very brief, twenty-seven days, and considering all of the other things she has accomplished in her life, this romance could have been a footnote in her tale of her life, but this ultimately shapes her future. It is with Gardel that Micaela is able to heal by mixing the teachings of her ancestors and the science she learns from formal schooling together. Although Micaela uncontrollably begins to imagine being in a romantic relationship with Gardel, the power that she possesses in herself and in herself alone awakens her.

Micaela finds reason to remember and tell this story because it has a long-lasting impact on her life. It is not important because she had an affair with a white man; it is pivotal because this relationship with the singer empowered her. Since Carlos Gardel is a well-known singer; his voice is the key to his success, and the symptoms of his sexually transmitted disease cause him to have problems with his voice/throat. In healing him, or relieving his symptoms, she not only has contact with a celebrity, heals him of an illness, but she saves his career. After Mano Santa allowed her to take the lead while treating the symptoms of Gardel's illness, Micaela reminds us that she healed Gardel on multiple occasions in the text. When she provides the reader with dates, she references them to the day she healed Gardel. "Era martes, 2 de abril. La noche anterior había curado a Gardel y me quedé dormida entre sus brazos" (41). Even though she mentions falling asleep in his arms, the healing is what she lists first. She finds power in healing someone, and it makes it even more spectacular that this person is Carlos Gardel. This act of healing the singer shifts her life, and all other events revolve around this point of reference. There are other examples where she references time using the act of curing Gardel. "Me encaminé hasta la

estación. Todavía resonaban en mi cabeza los comentarios de mis <<compañeras>> de escuela. Pero esa mañana ya había curado a Gardel” (47). When her classmates make Micaela feel uncomfortable she thinks of the great act she performed that morning. It gives her value when she feels that others challenge her worth by recognizing her as a *stranger*. There are no hints of a possible romantic relationship here because her curing him is substantial enough on its own. Healing Gardel makes her feel as good as or better than her classmates from the medical school. Unlike the pale skin that legitimizes her classmates or makes them esteemed students, this act defines Micaela and validates her as significant. This coping technique, referencing the act of healing, gives her a sense of belonging when it is obvious that she does not belong in this society.

As her affair with Gardel progresses, we see less and less of the coping mechanism she used before to validate her existence and belonging. Micaela shifts her attention more and more to the romantic aspects of their relationship. Because her tale is centered on this romantic relationship with Gardel, we know that it is important; but, it would not be fair to assume that Micaela values this relationship only because of Gardel’s racial makeup. Micaela is not a Mayotte Capécia like figure. She is captivated by Gardel; however, it is not because he is white. There are no connections between her feelings towards him and his ancestry. Since she is enthusiastic about these romantic encounters with him from the very beginning, we cannot establish that she falls for him because she had the opportunity to get to know Gardel; however, it is reasonable to believe that she is extremely excited about these meetings with him because of his fame. We see this throughout the text in indirect ways. As she reviews what happens within this twenty-seven-day time frame, Micaela does not refer to him by his first name Carlos. While recalling conversations that included other

characters, some of them refer to him as Carlos or even Carlitos, but Micaela never refers to him by first name in her own voice. The protagonist calls him by stage names, Gardel or *el Zorzal* or *el Morocho* because this is what attracts him to her. This suggests that she is excited by the idea of being romantically involved with someone famous, regardless of his race.

It is important to note that although Micaela allows herself to fantasize about a being in a serious romantic relationship with Gardel, she knows that they will never be serious. In light of Fanon's assertion that there cannot be an authentic relationship between a white man and black woman because the white man is always superior to the black woman, *La amante de Gardel* presents an interesting power dynamic between Micaela and Gardel (25). Before we agree or disagree with Fanon on interracial relationships, we have to clarify that Micaela and Gardel's relationship has two dimensions, that of lovers and that of nurse-patient. Even though the romantic aspect of their relationship overshadows the patient-nurse aspect, the latter does have an effect on the dynamics of their relationship.

On the one hand, the economic disparity that Fanon points to as a divider between black and white is present between the two lovers (24). Gardel is a part of the societal body; he is a white man and has no issues with *belonging* even while he is in foreign lands. This singer has fame and wealth that Micaela, a girl from a pueblo, has never seen before. At first glance it does appear that Gardel is superior to Micaela socially and economically; however, in the novel he is portrayed as a physically weak individual. Gardel's inferiority is internal while Micaela's is external. When the readers first encounter Gardel, he is

extremely ill due to the effects of syphilis, and throughout the novel, he suffers from the symptoms of his illness. In the relationship, physically he is the weaker being. He holds a higher position socially, but physically, Micaela towers over him. This is played out in their first encounter:

Un resuello surgía de entre los almohadones de la cama. Dos almohadas aupaban una cara palidísima, enmarcada por un pelo muy negro. Me detuve en seco ante la visión de aquel rostro regordete, inflamado: grandes bolsas colgaban debajo de los ojos, una pátina de sudor le cubría la frente y la barbilla (Santos-Febres 29).

When Mano Santa and Micaela enter the hotel room to help treat Gardel's illness, he is lying down with his head supported by pillows. Micaela is superior in health to Gardel and at this moment she and her grandmother are authoritative figures in his treatment, everyone else, especially Gardel is powerless. They have physical control over his lifeless, weak body, and his success, his career depends on them alleviating his symptoms.

Micaela's power over Gardel is also portrayed in her descriptions of their sexual encounters: "Los hombres siempre encontraron quien se arrodillara frente a sus piernas y chupara. Pero frente a mí, antes de cantara en el Teatro Atenas de Manatí, se arrodillo Gardel" (124). Gardel is physically on his knees as Micaela stands up. Like the prostitutes that service men, Gardel services Micaela. The roles are reversed. At this moment, Micaela is the person with the advantage here.

Through Micaela's experiences we witness how the 1930's Afro-Puerto Rican woman was made a stranger on her own island. Micaela is denied access to public spaces and stared at while doing normal activities like attending classes only because she is black.

Santos-Febres brings to light the ways in which the United States played a significant role in influencing the othering of the Afro- Puerto Rican people by including a segregated hotel in the plot. Not only has Anglo-America *othered* the Afro-Puerto Rican people, it *othered* all Puerto Ricans as well. Santos-Febres demonstrates this by including the unethical medical experiments performed on Puerto Rican men and women by American doctors in the novel.

Although Micaela adopted the culture of the former colonizers as her own, this action is absolutely necessary in order to be successful on the island. Micaela does not wish to have success because she wants to be closer to white, she, as well as her grandmother, want Micaela to be the best her. Even though she assimilates white culture, she still holds on to things that make her unique. She uses the language of her ancestors to perform healing ceremonies.

In the end of the novel the reader finds that Micaela, despite the oppressive society she lives in, survives and excels in her career. The protagonist is aware of the United States' consumption of people and resources in Puerto Rico, so she uses their hunger to her advantage. Micaela takes her destiny in her own hands. She gives Dr. Martha Roberts the correct combinations to the magic mushroom because she knows that this action will secure her future.

Chapter 4. Conclusion

As an Afro-Puerto Rican woman Mayra Santos-Febres has broken down barriers in Puerto Rican literature. From *Anamu y manigua* to *La amante de Gardel* she has had an important role in Caribbean and Latin American literature. Her work has consistently destroyed stereotypes of people from marginalized groups and shed light on racial and gender issues not only in Puerto Rico but in the Americas as a whole. By creating characters of her racial group and by connecting the plots of her works to history, Santos-Febres legitimizes the images of the Afro- Puerto Rican women that she creates in her poetry and novels.

Through her writing techniques and active plot in *Nuestra señora de la noche* Santos-Febres brings to light important race and gender issues in Puerto Rico. She recreates a color-based hierarchy through the narration of the novel to help demonstrate the othering and sexualization of black women on the island. With *Isabel la negra*, Santos-Febres redefines the Afro-Puerto Rican woman by creating a protagonist that overcomes poverty, abandonment and discrimination by using the system designed to oppress her and people like her.

Although Isabel is in the business of selling other women's bodies for economic gain, she still does not fit into the sex worker stereotype usually assigned to Afro-Puerto Rican women. She is very successful and becomes very wealthy with her profession, but she also betters the conditions of her employees by providing them with a space to meet men and work and shelter. Not only does she help the sex workers, she gives money to her community church.

With *La amante de Gardel* Santos-Febres creates a space in which Micaela the stranger Micaela—outcast and oppressed by her own society—is given the power to heal her oppressor. The power Santos-Febres assigns to Micaela are not supernatural, but is a product of skills learned through formal training and passed down through ancestry. The author also uses this novel to reveal the trickle down effects that American colonization of Puerto Rico has had on not just Afro-Puerto Ricans, but all Puerto Ricans.

Micaela used her lover to unlock her potential. She practiced her healing skills by experimenting with Gardel. With this patient-nurse relationship, Micaela is able to apply not only the things passed down from her ancestors, but also things learned in formal education. Even though she betrays her grandmother and tells Dr. Martha Roberts the secrets of the magic mushroom, she does it to secure her own future and create her own social mobility.

Although the protagonists of these two novels are quite different, they confront similar issues. Both women are romantically involved with influential white men. Instead of creating a plot in which a disadvantage woman of color used a white lover for social mobility, Santos- Febres built protagonists that used their own strength and intelligence to improve their positions in society. Neither Carlos Gardel nor Fernando Fornarís is responsible for the success of Micaela or Isabel. Both women were involved in these relationships for their physical pleasure.

In their sexual relationships both Micaela and Isabel decide to engage in sexual intercourse with their romantic partners. By allowing the protagonists to choose with whom and when they have sex, Santos-Febres deviates from the usual narrative of black

women being victims of sexual assault. In *Nuestra señora de la noche* Isabel is almost raped; however, Santos-Febres did not allow the sexual violence to occur in the plot. With this, she gives the Afro-Puerto Rican woman power over her body.

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