

## Uneasy Talk about Race: Critique of Puerto Rican Race Relations in Mayra Santos-Febres' *Sobre piel y papel*

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A talk about race and one's color is always complicated in Puerto Rico. In the collection of essays *Sobre piel y papel* (2005), Mayra Santos-Febres, a well-known contemporary Puerto Rican writer and public intellectual,<sup>1</sup> reflects on this unease: "Sé muy bien que nombrar colores de piel es asunto escabroso en nuestro país. Nombrar al negro o a la negra, al mulato, a la grifa, al jabao. [...] Esto de hablar de lo negro resulta difícil empresa. Y por ello necesario" (63). She poses to ask why by naming race we nearly trespass what is socially acceptable. Her response is immediate: "'Racismo,' contestarían algunos sin pensarlo dos veces. Y tienen razón. Sin embargo, mientras más lo pienso, más me convengo de que esta contestación oculta más de lo que revela" (Santos-Febres, *Sobre* 64). The writer argues that tact required for treating race and color speaks of complex social phenomena that signify the burden of living *mestizaje*. She adds that social consent of avoiding discussing race on the public arena promotes inherent racism, making Afro-Puerto Ricans the most disadvantaged group (*Sobre* 73, 160). Addressing the linguistic unease of mentioning race, Santos-Febres uncovers social and political ramifications of the difficulty of talking about color and race in Puerto Rico. This essay will present that calling for public articulation of blackness, the author proposes a program of writing the African heritage into modern national history, deconstructing racial construction as natural, and thinking about the black identity beyond essentialism. Her aim is to recognize the existence of racial prejudice on the island in order to claim social equality.

Before we begin our discussion of Santos-Febres writing, we need to recreate the general social context in which her work is produced. According to Arlene Torres and Jorge Duany in Puerto Rico, racial hierarchy is organized according to skin color, facial features, hair texture, social status, occupation, family ancestry, location, and place of birth. Torres underscores that these racial markers are, actually, "discursive practices" that do not reflect on biology but on a particular context in which a person is racially identified (74). Since racial categories are socially constructed and negotiated on the island, people can claim a racial category different from *negro*, which is still widely stigmatized by being associated with slavery and seen as socially inferior. As an attempt to eliminate negative implications in articulating blackness, Puerto Ricans adopted *prieto*, a term devoid either ethnic or racial connotation. Forging a more positive attitude toward black skin color, *prieto*, at the same time, ushered the epoch of collective psychological denial of African presence on the island (Alleyne 146). Since African-Puerto Ricans are primary targets of social prejudice, they are most influenced by an ideology of *blanqueamiento*, which entails not only procreating lighter-skinned descendents but also renouncing one's African physical traits and cultural roots (Duany, "Reconstructing" 98). A precarious social position of blacks is also explained by the fact that they are the primary victims of discrimination and racial prejudice, not mulattos (Duany, "Reconstructing" 103). Hence blacks try to escape their inferior social position by identifying with lighter-skinned racial groups.

Racism in Puerto Rico is officially denied due to absence of sanctioned institutional segregation or oppression of any racial group. This allowed the formation of a collective myth of racial democracy, like in Brazil and Mexico. Coupled with monolingualism and absence of syncretic religions on the island, the idea of racial homogeneity gained a solid base by the end of the nineteenth-century. Alleyne signals that homogeneity as the nation's emerging ideal manifested in "We are all Puerto Ricans" embodies an ideology that strived to forge a solid national identity, to dissociate itself from U.S. racial prejudices, and, simultaneously, to secure

dominance of white elites (135). In the vein of nation-building project, the influence of the Mexican concept of *mestizaje* became prominent in the 1930s. It distinguished white and Indian components of the Puerto Rican racial scheme and was particularly embraced by writers<sup>2</sup> (Alleyne 128). In this paradigm, African presence was erased as *negros* were replaced by *indios*, who were practically extinct by the end of the eighteenth-century and disappeared from census after 1778, having been coupled with *pardos libres* (free mulattos) into a single category (Alleyne 115).

However, despite the claim for equal right to all racial types, blacks along with other people of dark hues occupy disproportionately the bottom of the social pyramid. Alleyne adverts that major social institutions are still outside the domain of black population, such as the main campus of the University of Puerto Rico where black presence is still hardly noticeable (135). In his recent study, Duany avows that the vestiges of the colonial ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority in the Caribbean perpetuate discrimination and racial prejudice against black Puerto Ricans (“Reconstructing” 98). As we will see later in the discussion of Santos-Febres’s conceptualization of race relations, racial prejudice is maintained through language and division of social space, closing social opportunities for darker-skinned Puerto Ricans. Alleyne observes a correlation between social class and race/color in the Caribbean and, at the same time, warns against discounting class prejudice (classism) in favor of race prejudice (135). This is an important observation that suggests a more complex consideration of social conditions that perpetuate low socio-economic status of certain groups. However, the fact that aesthetic and moral value of fairer skin color and certain facial features and hair types which are opposite to *pelo malo* (kinky hair) operates as one of the pillars of social hierarchy attests to undeniable color-based racism in Puerto Rico (Alleyne; Godreau, “Peinando”). Puerto Rican popular iconography, as presented on television and in newspaper advertisements, promotes white color, thus strengthening socialization of perception of whiteness as desirable (Alleyne 126). In *Turning out Blackness* (2005), Yeidy M. Rivero stipulates that Puerto Rican television presented images of blackness between 1940s and 1990s, but it was acted out by white performers (188). As a result, “translated” blackness reaffirmed the nation’s *blanqueamiento*. Interestingly, in the 1970s, the stereotypical image of Puerto Ricans that circulated in the U.S. mainland was that of an Afro-Puerto Rican, which was “an affront to hispanophilic” culture (Briggs 195). It was formed on the base of American TV representations and Puerto Rican working-class culture. However, due to a specific socio-cultural context and a strong orientation towards *mejorar la raza* (to improve the race), this subversive representation of Puerto Rican identity, even satirically, was never welcomed on the island. Analyzing ads of hair products in her ethnographic study of a hair salon in Ponce, Godreau speaks about representation of black curly hair as something “unnatural,” “an exogenous incident that we should avoid at all costs,” and “pathologically excessive”; therefore, a woman should rid of her savage hair style by straitening her hair (Godreau, “Peinando” 109). *Pelo malo* can nullify light complexion; hence the domestication of *pelo malo* is a primary strategy of overriding African ancestry in one’s racial identification. These cultural practices point out that Puerto Ricans try to hide their blackness or darkness at all costs in their struggle for social success.

As a black public intellectual, Santos-Febres actively reacts to the ways in which race is constructed, performed, and internalized in Puerto Rican popular culture as well as articulated in the academy both on the island and the U.S. mainland. Before we begin our discussion of the issue of race of *Sobre piel y papel*, it is worth mentioning that this book is not the first instance when Santos-Febres addresses the racial question in Puerto Rico. To present a fuller picture of Santos-Febres’s conceptualization of race on the island, it is necessary to pause to comment on her other works that take on the racial issue. Already in her first collection of poetry *Anamú y manigua* (1991), she focuses on the intersection of race and the continuum of female experience and the black female body. Writing through her own genealogy, Santos-Febres revalorizes the black female body making it the locus of her own experience and cultural identity. In her collection of short

stories, *Pez de vidrio* (1994), the writer approaches the topic of race from a different perspective. Unlike the empowering spirit of *Anamú y manigua*, a short story “Marina y su olor” from *Pez de vidrio* demonstrates how the black woman is essentialised and her identity is reduced to the olfactory function of her body. Santos-Febres reveals discriminatory cultural practice of converting *la negra* (negro woman) into a token of an indecent woman. The story of doña Marina Paris shows that the writer earlier in her career attempted to uncover Puerto Rican cultural practices that exoticize and essentialize the black woman (Rivera Villegas, web).

In her first and most acclaimed novel *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000), Santos-Febres tells the story of a mulatto transvestite Leocadio who takes on a pseudonym of Sirena Selena and becomes a Caribbean bolero singing drag queen. Narrating the life of Sirena Selena, Santos-Febres unveils the exotic nature of the mulatto body that performs the feminine gender and entices the white male’s desire of the exotic. Again in *Nuestra señora de la noche* (2006) (*Our Lady of the Night* in the English translation), the writer turns to the world of lust and money to examine the cultural meaning of the racialized female body and sexual desire. Santos-Febres chooses Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, with the nickname “Isabel la negra,” the most famous Puerto Rican prostitute of the middle of the twentieth-century as her first black female protagonist. The story of Isabel la negra and her milieu invites the reader to consider the play of race in the dynamics of sexual desire on the island. The prostitutes who capture the reader’s attention are either black or mulatto. Speaking about Minerva, a black prostitute, the narrator tellingly identifies her social location in relation to other Puerto Rican women: “They [other women] were all superior to her, because Minerva was a whore and she was black, and those were the worst two things you could be on the face of the earth” (69). The novel underscores that the racialized bodies of prostitutes circulate as abject, and yet exotic and desirable, objects in the male sexual economy. The narrator stresses that the black female body is nothing more than a commodity in that economy: “The same old ritual would begin again there, to devour his first *mutala, negra*, and then attempt to leave her behind” (348; emphasis in the original). However, Santos-Febres highlights that despite her marginal position, the black woman can find power in the Puerto Rican society. The historic Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer exemplifies how a black woman can rise from the bottom of the social ladder to its upper level. In a sense, Isabel la negra serves as an example of female empowerment thorough her body and racial identity, just like an array of women of Santos-Febres’s family find their empowerment in preparing the ground for social success of their descendents in *Anamú y manigua*. In a vein similar to *Anamú y manigua* and *Nuestra señora de la noche*, in her latest novel *Fe en disfraz* (2009) the writer continues exploring strategies of reclaiming the black female body. As we will discuss later, this novel offers a new perspective on deconstructing certain cultural practices that maintain the legacy of slavery, which depicts the black body as abject and worthless.

Continuing crystallizing the topic of race, *Sobre piel y papel* offer a deeper exploration of social and cultural connotations of race in Puerto Rico in comparison to the writer’s fiction. In this collection of essays, Santos-Febres compiles a series of pieces that she began to publish in press and present at various academic conferences as early as 1991. Several of them appeared in Puerto Rican press, such as *Claridad*, *Diálogo*, *San Juan Star*, *El Nuevo Día*, and *El Vocero*. *Sobre piel y papel* manifests her standpoint on the focal issues that she brings up in her career as a public intellectual. These questions are race, gender, Puerto Rico, and national literature. Her interest in these issues is not arbitrary, for they comprise the central topic of her doctoral dissertation titled “The Translocal Papers: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature,” which she defended at Cornell University in 1992. In *Sobre piel y papel*, Santos-Febres explores the dimensions of gender in the section “Labia,” race and color in “Piel” and, finally, her vocation of a writer in “Papel.” She looks at race in Puerto Rico from a marginal position—of a woman of African descent whose black skin color prescribes her a constellation of identities. Despite enjoying a quite high social status as a PhD and a professor at the University of Puerto Rico, she constantly reminds her reader that her black subjectivity does

not permit her to situate herself comfortably within the dominant culture (Santos-Febres, “Literatura” *Sobre* 124). Her intent as a writer is to contest prescribed identities and internalized racial categories in order to think blackness in new terms. As a black public intellectual, poet, essayist, novelist, and critic, Santos-Febres engages issues that are normally silenced on the island. Perhaps, the reason why her book did not get a wide critical response in Puerto Rico is due to these unsettling reflections that she elicits, making the critic and the reader inevitably name color and race. She poses questions that make her Puerto Rican reader feel uncomfortable because her enquiries call forth reflections about one’s blackness that disturbs the notion of “la gran familia puertorriqueña” and make one realize that racial hierarchy has changed little since colonial times. *Sobre piel y papel* is a compilation of personal and public essays written over fourteen years. This collection is interesting because it explicitly reveals the writer’s political agenda. *Sobre piel y papel* combines serious, burning content with lightness of creative writing, escaping academic rigor. Writing her ideas in the form of *ensayo* (essay), Santos-Febres enters into a polemic with great Puerto Rican thinkers Tomás Blanco and Antonio S. Pedreira, voicing her critique of racial relations in Puerto Rico.

Before entering into our analyses of Santos-Febres’s conceptualization of race, it is necessary to indicate her positionality as an intellectual and as an actor of the Puerto Rican racial hierarchy. In her interview with Marcia Morgado to *The Barcelona Review*, she speaks about her identities that define her peripheral position in Puerto Rican society:

Yo no creo en marginalidades fijas, quizás porque pertenezco a varias. Soy mujer, negra, caribeña y quién sabe qué otras cosas más que me colocan en un margen. Pero he observado que este margen siempre es móvil. A veces estoy en el centro (por cuestiones de educación, de clase quizás) y a veces soy la abyecta (por razones de piel, por pertenecer a un país colonizado por EE.UU.). Precisamente por esa movilidad me doy permiso para transitar por varios mundos, por varios márgenes, a veces hasta por el centro. Y así me conecto con la gente que, como yo, anda visitando por ahí, transgrediendo fronteras sociales. (Santos-Febres, “Literatura”)

She affirms that her marginal and central positions are always contextual, for her identities exist in flux. She can assume a voice as a Third World black intellectual in First World academic circle, but ironically, it does not save her from a possibility of being treated as an abject, racialized, colonial body. By naming her blackness as one of the identities that define her marginal social location, Santos-Febres affirms that African-Puerto Ricans occupy the bottom of the country’s socio-racial scheme. This is the premise on which she grounds her critique of racial relations on the island.

As we have seen in the essay “Por boca propia,” which opens her reflections on race in *Sobre piel y papel*, Santos-Febres touches on a “risky” topic of race, not fearing to be awkward by pronouncing skin color. Puerto Ricans do not know whether they should advocate for social justice, for the need to stop denying that color matters, or simply avoid the topic. She observes that it is uncomfortable to name in public any color, “las otras tonalidades,” but white, which is normative and undeniably opens doors to success in any social sphere (Santos-Febres, *Sobre* 63). She connects this uneasiness of uttering the interlocutor’s color with racism, which everyone denies but lives daily. Likewise, Jorge Duany notices the difficulty of talking and researching race on the island due to widely-spread denial of racial prejudice (“Neither” 9). Stating that not only black is debased but so are any shades that deviate from white, Santos-Febres contests the myth of Puerto Rican racial democracy. Despite the claims for embracing *mestizaje*, Puerto Rican racist color scheme accepts only white color. Her observation points to a common practice of using euphemisms when identifying skin color. Proliferation of folk racial categories that include at least nineteen racial terms, which reflect various degrees of proximity among people, demonstrates that one’s color is a sensitive matter in the society that claims to

equally recognize every color (Duany, “Neither” 1-2). Unease produced by the need to name color together with numerous euphemisms speaks for the fact that an utterance concerning color is a political decision at all times. We can compare this linguistic and psychological confusion with the situation in Brazil where people are exceptionally attentive to the way they articulate one’s color. As one of the axes of inequality, Brazilians employ euphemisms mostly if darkness is concerned that point to ambiguity of racial perceptions in the society (Sheriff). In Brazil silence associated with racism functions as a form of cultural censorship, revealing that racial democracy is nothing but a myth. By pointing out the presence of euphemisms and silences, Santos-Febres demonstrates that racial equality is also a cultural invention that does not correspond to Puerto Rican social reality because *pigmentoocracia* is what forms the core of the country’s social structure. For the writer, rejecting euphemisms is an essentially political strategy of contesting racial hierarchy, revealing that Puerto Rico is far from being a color-blind society.

Santos-Febres argues that social change comes, first of all, from recognition of *lo negro*. She invites Puerto Rican academic groups to begin an open discussion and study of race. For her, black Puerto Ricans, including these “que viven convencidos de no serlo,” should be foremost speakers in these public forums (Santos-Febres, *Sobre* 67). The essay’s title, “Por boca propia,” invites the reader to name her own skin color first, to realize that silence perpetuates inequality and that skin color is not something to be ashamed of. This is a first step to debunk racial democracy as a mechanism of denying racial inequality on the island. In “Porcientos contranatura,” she sees one of the ramifications of silence around blackness in less advantaged social conditions of black Puerto Ricans. Santos-Febres maintains that recognition of the black race bears immediate results in the government’s increased “atención a políticas públicas, disposiciones legales, criterios de empleo, salud y educación que tomen en verdadera cuenta nuestra raza” (*Sobre* 127). This assertion demonstrates that her advocacy of the African heritage and of the need to change social perception of blackness is intimately connected with a broader social context that reveals corollaries of racial prejudice experienced by Afro-Puerto Ricans daily.

In “Porcientos contranatura,” Santos-Febres’s agenda of expressing race publicly gains more force. As a gesture of symbolic connection with academics who revived African legacy, she dedicates her essay to Isabelo Zenón who authored an influential study on Afro-Puerto Rican culture. The context of Santos-Febres’s reflection on race is a restaurant where she is joined by a friend. Noticing that two of them are the only black customers, she observes that dining at a restraint is still a luxury “que muchos como nosotros no podrían jamás darse. Recalco ‘como nosotros.’ Porque pasaba que además [...] los dos comensales que conversábamos éramos negros” (*Sobre* 123). This scene is a powerful social commentary in which, with a subtle gesture, she reveals racially based social inequality. Her use of “nosotros” demonstrates class consciousness which she employs to ally with working-class Afro-Puerto Ricans and to affirm her voice as a speaker for this group. Reminiscent of her earlier interview to *The Barcelona Review*, the writer reiterates her double positionality, which permits her to transgress class boundaries: “Éramos dos solitarios, de esa manera extraña en que estamos solos los negros profesionales en esta isla, conscientes al mismo tiempo de nuestro privilegio y nuestra marginalidad” (*Sobre* 124). Asserting the voice as a public intellectual, not solely academic, is noticeable throughout *Sobre piel y papel*, as the author endeavors to raise racial consciousness.

Continuing her discussion of the need to break silence around blackness, the writer brings in the issue of official racial classification. She expresses her discontent of the results of the recent census that counted only 10.8 percent of black population in Puerto Rico. Her explanations of the census controversy offer valuable insight on racial relations on the island. Like a number of scholars, Santos-Febres notes irrelevant options for indicating race in a society largely comprised of mixed population. The census does not include neither any of the mixed racial categories nor euphemisms in terms of which people identify themselves. As a consequence, “la gente no marcó blanco por no dejar el ‘blanco’ sin llenar” (Santos-Febres,

*Sobre* 125). The author then questions why Puerto Ricans—who *de facto* are, as Duany pertinently put it, neither white nor black—did not mark the “other” category (“Neither” 3). The response is that what seems to be an odd decision at first sight is, actually, an echo of internalized colonial racial hierarchy:

Quizás lo que persiste es la antigua lógica de la gradación de color que valora a la gente a medida que se acercan al ideal de “la normalidad,” al ideal blanco. Quizás lo que podemos leer en los resultados del censo es que ese por ciento de la población que marcó “blanco” como su definición racial, en realidad lo que estaba haciendo era escogiendo lo que quería ser en vez de lo que en realidad era. Lo que conduce a otra pregunta: ¿qué es lo que hoy día cuenta como blanco o como negro? (Santos-Febres, *Sobre* 125)

The desire of whiteness was imposed by Hispanic culture, and it is prevailing today. This collective fantasy for white skin color is powerful, for it forces Afro-Puerto Ricans to distance themselves from blackness. They unconsciously subject themselves to the ideology of *blanqueamiento*, relegating their own color to inferior position. Revealing racial categories as purely contextual, the writer contests what is perceived as “black” and as “white,” for both categories are relative and, for the most part, interpreted differently by each individual.

Another explanation for the virtually disappearing group of black Puerto Ricans is the weight of historical memory, which reminds that insisting upon the country’s blackness can be considered national treason. She confirms once again that blackness does not fit into Puerto Rican national project. As the census demonstrates, an immediate result of this ideology is the way Afro-Puerto Ricans conceptualize their color. Besides Santos-Febres, the 2000 census has been widely commented upon by scholars of race on the island and in the U.S. mainland. Duany stipulates that the term “negro” is the most depreciated in the racial market, and people naturally avoid being identified as such. Moreover, progressive whitening of the population is not solely the result of persons’ conscious choices. Until 1970, racial category was defined by the census enumerators, who given the state ideology of *blanqueamiento*, predominantly tended to classify their respondents as white (Duany, “Neither” 9, 45). In 2000, the census reported 80.5 percent white, 8 percent black<sup>3</sup>, and 11.5 percent of other races. Charles Rogler attests preponderance of the white race to the absence of racial prejudice that would preclude mixed races from transitioning to the white racial category (Rogler qtd. in Duany, “Neither” 16). Duany makes an important corrective to Roger stating that “the whitening of the Puerto Rican population is hardly due to the absence of racial prejudice but rather to its very presence” (Duany “Neither” 16). As we see, the outcome of the 2000 census is a result of centuries-long policies and ideologies that denigrated blackness. In this context, Santos-Febres’s project of recognizing the value of blackness and publicly acknowledging black color is a painful endeavor because, as she succinctly puts it, “[e]s imposible defender lo que no se valora” (*Sobre* 126).

As we have seen in Santos-Febres discussion of small, yet telling, instances of racial inequality, the fact that Puerto Rico officially endorses *mestizaje* does not preclude it from having racial discrimination. In this light, *Sobre piel y papel* is a powerful critique of the national myth of racial democracy. Examining social life in Puerto Rico, Tomás Blanco, a renowned ideologue of racial democracy, concludes in his widely cited *El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico*: “Aunque la mezcla de negros y blancos es considerable, el elemento africano ha influido sólo muy ligeramente sobre los rasgos culturales. [...] El prejuicio racial tal como se entiende en Estados Unidos, no existe” (Blanco 138). Blanco’s populist program is to harmonize heterogeneous society through reconciliation (Díaz Quiñones 18). In his paternalistic view, Puerto Rican identity is assembled under the umbrella of Hispanic culture, which assures peaceful coexistence of races. Santos-Febres argues against this position, for it negates the existence of racial prejudice on the island. Although Puerto Rico has never had institutionalized racial discrimination, the black race does not enjoy the same social privileges as white or

lighter-skinned groups. An overarching argument of *Sobre piel y papel* is to refute the absence of racial prejudice in Puerto Rico. She admits that one of the forms of racism is not to acknowledge it (*Sobre* 73, 160).

However, recognition of racism through speaking about race has personal toll for a black intellectual. In her essay “¿Ser una negra pública?,” Santos-Febres addresses the dilemma of being a public black intellectual. She questions what is the optimal decision: “No hablar de raza perpetúa el silencio y la marginación pública. Pero hablar ‘exclusiva y preponderante’ del tema puede contribuir a localizar a los negros públicos en un lugar identificable, clasificable, previamente neutralizado” (*Sobre* 74). She resists becoming a “token,” a sort of “social performance” of blackness. Her project is to introduce new dimensions into black identity that would make it equal to other identities. She seeks for an escape from being essentialized as a black writer through her representation politics. As we have discussed earlier, her professional and personal dilemma is whether she should assume an identity that would represent her entirely as black or whether she ought to move beyond the boundaries of blackness to articulate universal experiences. Her work up to date demonstrates that she has not solved this controversy, for at times, she can be accused of not treating the topic of the black race pronouncedly enough and, at other times, she seems to be judging Puerto Rican literature solely through the lens of race. Santos-Febres’s works demonstrate that she oscillates between her stances of transcending black essentialism, as manifested in *Sobre piel y papel*, and her sheer interest in tracing how black and mulatto races operate in Puerto Rican culture, as we have discussed it above in relation to her fiction writing.

As a part of her project of dislodging the myth of racial equality, Santos-Febres disapproves of underrepresentation of Afro-Antillean artistic production and history in Puerto Rican national discourse in *Sobre piel y papel*. In the essay “La pesadilla del folklore,” she observes that erasure of African presence in the national history is largely due to representation of African-Puerto Rican culture exclusively as folkloric and primordial. Analyzing the first museum dedicated to African legacy on the island, el Primer Museo de la Raíz Africana, the writer comments that since its opening in 1994, it has had little state support and has exhibited only folkloric elements of African culture such as music, dance, animistic religions, and daily life during slavery. The problem of such politics of representation is that the black becomes the synonym of archaic and pre-modern:

Es decir, que quien quiera ser negro tiene que vivir de cara al pasado, dándole la espalda al presente, a la tecnología, la ciencia, la jurisprudencia, las artes y las letras, porque en esos predios ser negro **no cuenta**, ser negro **no vale**. **No es posible** ser negro en el siglo veinte sin pretender quedarse fuera de la historia. [...] Es que no solo desde el folklore (o su categoría prima hermana de “lo popular”) se debe pensar la raza. Estas categorías congelan el desarrollo de una cultura en el espacio de lo primitivo, de lo anterior a la historia, de lo antropológico. (Santos-Febres, *Sobre* 78; emphasis in the original)

Emplacement of *lo negro* in the folkloric past impedes its representation as modern, therefore suitable for the nation-building project. Moreover, as the exposition at the abovementioned museum suggests, Afro-Puerto Rican (either Afro or African) is represented according to anthropological writing canon; that is, distant in time from the contemporary museum visitor. As a result, Afro-Antillean heritage is inserted solely in the narratives of Africa and slavery. For any country that promotes racial hybridity, the politics of temporal displacement of blackness is not unusual. The black race is understood as pure and associated with the nation’s origins while *mestizaje* is considered to belong to the present of the nation (Isar Godreau, “Folkloric” 182). Thus, manifestations of blackness are interpreted as vestiges of the past that do not belong to the hybrid, modern present.

Santos-Febres calls *museificación* and folklorization of the black element the two main causes of absence of blackness from the modern history to Puerto Rico (*Sobre* 78). Eleuterio Santiago-Díaz describes the tendency to ascribe atemporal coordinates to *negritude* in the Caribbean as ontological violence (24). Until the beginning of the twentieth-century, anthropology and history considered the Afro-Caribbean subject as a part of the primitive tradition and slavery; therefore, after abolition, it cannot be imagined as a full-fledged subject of Western modernity that grounds on Hispanic culture. As a result, the prefix “Afro” obtains negative connotations that associate it with the primitive, not civilized, archaic, and, consequently, socially inferior. In his seminal work *Wizards and Scientists: Exploration of Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (2002), Stephan Palmié argues against the epistemological split that displaces African element from modernity by claiming that traditional Caribbean cultural practices are nurtured by the same history that originated modernity. Afro-Caribbean tradition and modernity are two co-existing epistemological elements that germinated in the context of shared social movements. Working in the same vein as Palmié, Santos-Febres speaks for changing the angle from which Afro-Puerto Rican culture should be seen because current representation preserves its primitive condition, making it incapable of contributing to modern national culture. Santos-Febres’s program is to rewrite history, beginning with reorganization of museums as institutions that codify national history. She observes that elimination of African history from educational system is another side of the state program of writing Puerto Rican history entirely in terms of Taíno, Hispanic, and North American cultures. In “Porcientos contranatura,” the author speaks of impossibility of massive recuperation of black culture because only intellectuals like her friend and herself, “dos negros universitarios, concedores de nuestra historia,” have access to knowledge that one has to learn outside of classroom (*Sobre* 124). She calls this part of the country’s past “our history” once again highlighting that separation along racial lines exists and that it should be strategically maintained if blacks want to reclaim their history. Santos-Febres reiterates that without a broader access to the history of Afro-Puerto Ricans, recognition of blackness is hardly possible.

We should notice that despite disproportionate underrepresentation of black culture in Puerto Rico, it still forms part of the national canon. However, it undergoes significant changes in meaning on its way to popular culture. Although contemporary Puerto Rican popular culture has successfully adapted Afro-Puerto Rican artistic forms, including *bomba* and *plena*, they are stripped off their initial blackness (Alleyne 125). Resemantization of Afro-Puerto Rican artistic forms reveals that popular culture, which grossly denies blackness, appropriates that art as divested of race and color. As a response, Santos-Febres notes that any black artists’ attempts to problematize the relation between art and race meet immediate public criticism. An example *par excellence* of this controversy is the exhibition *Paréntesis: ocho artistas negros contemporáneos*, organized in 1996. Santos-Febres comments that this exhibition exemplifies that Afro-Puerto Rican plastic art is a modern institution, and it can contribute to the nation, without masking its racial origins (*Sobre* 79). In his introductory word, Edwin Velázquez, curator and exhibiting artist, admits that to use the word “negros” in the exhibition’s title, on the one hand, suggests absence of racism in the country, and, on the other, speaks for “una estética de la apariencia donde el descrepamiento está disfrazado y el término negro es considerado repulsivo, ofensivo y frecuentemente es asociado con lo negativo” (web). Uncovering explicit but never talked about racism, his intent is to expose blackness as an obvious but silenced reality of quotidian life. However, *Paréntesis* as a public manifestation of blackness met severe criticism for prioritizing artists’ racial identity over art and for splitting the nation. Santos-Febres discerns in this critique racist rhetoric that reacts against any articulation of blackness by claiming that it endangers coexistence of the three ethnic groups (Indigenous, European, and African). Comparing how white and black artists voice their racial identities, the writer concludes that whiteness is unchangeably a dominant position that permits to reflect on racial topic within wider social domains, without running the danger of meeting a vigorous opposition.

Along with arguing against folkloric representation of the African heritage, Santos Febres calls for considering the way national history has systematically been excluding blacks from its narrative in her essay “Raza en la cultura puertorriqueña.” She sustains that official historic truth is the main instrument of abjectifying the black race and turning it into an intimidating, marginal group. From colonial times to modern history, Afro-Puerto Ricans have been treated as an inferior element in the racial mix. Influenced by eugenics theories of the early twentieth-century, Antonio Pedreira’s concept of *insularismo* conceives Puerto Rican nation as a racial “confusion” (*Insularismo*). He argues that the nation is predicated upon the Spanish element, but the addition of other elements created an unstable, liminal mestizo identity. Santos-Febres refutes Pedreira’s conceptualization of Puerto Rican race as illness, especially the portrayal of blacks as violent and thus guilty of the turmoil on the island at the turn of the nineteenth-century. Through association of blacks with social disorder and U.S. occupation that it entailed, the black race began to be feared by the rest of the population. Santos-Febres interprets this terror of blackness as the cause of the black race being erased from the annals of national history: “Los orígenes del miedo a lo negro son los causantes de que la totalidad de la historia negra de Puerto Rico permanezca silenciada y oculta” (*Sobre* 145). The remnants of black presence are interpreted only in negative light, with blacks being blamed for virtually every instance of violence on the island. Official explanation of those instances is irrational violence, and the writer accentuates that the political dimension of violence is always hidden. Criticizing Pedreira, Santos-Febres comments that “la supuesta enfermedad que aqueja a la identidad puertorriqueña no está en la presencia negra sino en su negación” (*Sobre* 160). Repudiation of blackness is the true cause of epistemological confusion of Puerto Ricans.

Critiquing official historical narrative which has systematically erased African presence, the writer reflects on the study of race as another field that has immense influence on the perception of blackness in Puerto Rico. Looking into the main intellectual currents that informed Puerto Rican construction of race in “Por boca propia,” Santos-Febres comments that an important achievement of contemporary race theory is not solely examination of social construction of blackness but, what is more important, recognition of “whiteness” as equally socially constructed as “normative” and “natural” that, for the writer, was an exceptional tool of control in the Caribbean. In deconstructing white color as “natural,” Santos-Febres see a crucial move toward contesting the white supremacy imposed by European epistemological order as innate.

Likewise, she singles out abolitionist discourse, discourse of Negritude, and contemporary social critique of race. She praises them for advocating the right of blacks but, at the same time, notices shortcomings such as essentialization of blackness that created stereotypical representation of blacks as “strong, sensual, cheerful, violent, primitive” in their effort to liberate blacks from oppressing cultural memory of slavery (*Sobre* 65). She call for abandoning conceptualizing blackness in essential terms and for the necessity to recognize a black person as a constellation of identities “[p]or que además de andar por ahí con este hermoso color de piel, tan lleno de historia, de viajes y de significados, también somos puertorriqueños, dominicanos, jamaquinos, curazoleños, jóvenes y viejos, hombres y mujeres, homo, hetero, amantes, hermanos, trabajadores, profesionales, artistas, escritores, madres, padres, policías, criminales, reverendos, políticos, humanos” (*Sobre* 66). The writer’s program of transcending blackness is apparent in her choice of protagonists in her writing. Despite the reader’s expectation to see works heavily populated by black characters, her fiction does not articulate skin color explicitly for the most part. Interestingly enough, she frequently opts for exploring social significance of the hybrid body. For instance, in *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* she chooses a mulatto transgender protagonist whose body is a site of white men’s sexual fantasies. As we have noted above, although Santos-Febres selects a mulatto person as her title character in this novel, the color of Selena’s body is not the topic that she explores closely. Rather, the writer’s interest in this text is the socio-cultural significance of the hybrid body that intersects race, gender, and sexuality.

In *Fe en disfraz*, Santos-Febres presents a black female protagonist who constructs her subjectivity through examination of slavery and by symbolically subjecting her body to sexual objectification and exploitation to a white male lover in order to recreate the initial context of Puerto Rican *mestizaje*. The novel's main protagonist, Fe Verdujo, is a historiographer working at a Puerto Rican university. She recuperates testimonies by slaves on the island and gradually finds herself identifying with those characters. She looks at her skin color as a site of violence experienced by slave women. Given her position as an academic, her interest in recuperating the history of slavery, and the motif of skin color and race, we may read the author's persona in Fe Verdujo. After *Sobre piel y papel*, *Fe en disfraz* is the most prominent text in which Santos-Febres voices her agenda concerning black race. However, *Fe en disfraz* is by far the only prominent example of putting in practice what she argues in *Sobre piel y papel*, such as revising the history of slavery to hear silenced voices thus deconstructing the notion of blackness as abject. Santos-Febres's political project in this novel reflects her insistence upon systematic rewriting the narrative of black race in the key historical moments: "Lo que sí es necesario es desmontar el cuento que define lo negro como negativo en su especificidad histórica. Verle sus costuras y sus tripas, estudiarlo como mito, mentira, construcción" (*Sobre* 144-145). History as well as race has to be exposed as constructions produced by certain social context from the perspective of dominant groups, part of which blacks have never been. As an academic well-versed in contemporary race theory, she understands the importance of conceptualizing race as a myth. She believes that the most effective strategy is to demonstrate the "seams" of racial construction and alternative routes it could have taken had it been molded from a different standpoint.

Like the organized of the exhibition *Paréntesis*, Santos-Febres walks a fine line of a "scabrous" topic of race in Puerto Rico. Her appeal exclusively to blacks may suggest that her racial scheme abides to the U.S. bipolar racial classification, especially since she completed her doctorate at Cornell University. However, this is a too quick assumption because the writer employs three racial groups—black, mulatto, and white—in her racial thinking but emphasizes blacks as the most racialized and denied group. As we have mentioned above, African-Puerto Ricans are more prone to discrimination than mixed racial groups; therefore, Santos-Febres's focus is on this most socially disadvantaged of groups. The corollary of raising the problem of negated blackness is the reexamination of the entire color scheme as well as euphemistic codes in Puerto Rico. Santos-Febres's critique of race unmasks the sign of absence through which blackness is signified. Her call to name color publicly strives for recognition of the black race in the society that masks racism by claiming itself to be color-blind. Since racism appeals to the language of nature in investing one race with power while subjugating the other, racial identification should be exposed as a myth and social construction. Santos-Febres's program is to eradicate negative connotations that blackness bears by demonstrating that they were invented in the course of history. Exposing the politics of blaming black Puerto Ricans for political instability in the past in the official historical discourse, she calls for purging socially constructed fear that blackness incites in Puerto Ricans as a result of purposefully connecting violence and blacks. As an instrument of perpetuating racial discrimination, the official narrative of nation's history should be rendered in terms of the contribution of Afro-Antillean heritage to the Puerto Rican national body. Likewise, Afro-Puerto Rican culture and roots needs to find its dignified place in the national history. The writer criticizes common representation of the African heritage as atemporal and linked only to tradition, hence displaced from modernity. She claims that this hiatus can be bridged by creating contemporary iconography of blackness that would present it as an essential part of Puerto Rican modernity and actuality. Albeit encouraging wider recognition of black identity, she resists essentialization of blackness, for it overwrites other subjectivities that blacks have the right to claim. As a writer and public intellectual, Santos-Febres assumes the voice for Afro-Puerto Rican community but maintains her in-between position, jingling universal and black themes in her writing in order to escape being labeled "una negra pública."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mayra Santos-Febres began publishing in international journals and newspapers in 1984. Her works appeared in *Casa de las Américas* in Cuba, *Revue Noir* in France, *Página doce* in Argentina, and *Latin American Review of Arts and Literature*, in New York, among others. During the 80's she also actively collaborated in several literary groups, such as Filo de Juego, En la Mirilla, and La Iguana Dorada. She debuted with her first book of poetry, *Anamú y manigua*, in 1991. It was immediately recognized by Puerto Rican literary critics who selected it as one of the 10 best books of the year. Her other collection of poetry, *El orden escapado*, was published the same year and won the 1st prize for poetry in the *Revista Trípico* in Puerto Rico. *Tercer mundo*, her third book of poetry, appeared in 2000. *Boat People*, a collection of twenty poems about the hardships of the Dominican, Cuban, and Haitian migrants, was published by Ediciones Callejón in 2005. Santos-Febres is also a prolific short story writer. In 1994, she published *Pez de vidrio*, a collection of short stories, which won the Premio Letras de Oro (USA, 1994). Her second collection of short stories, titled *Oso Blanco*, received a renowned Juan Rulfo Award (1996). *Urban Oracles*, a collection of short stories appeared in 1997. Next year, Santos-Febres published another collection of short stories titled *El cuerpo correcto*. Grijalbo Mondadori in Spain published Santos-Febres's first novel *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* in 2000. The novel was the finalist of the Rómulo Gallegos Novel Award in 2001 and the finalist of Primavera Novel Award of Espasa Calpe Editorial in Spain in 2006. In 2002, *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya*, her second novel, appeared from the same editor. Her next novel, *Nuestra Señora de la noche*, was published in 2006. In 2005, Ediciones Callejón published her collection of essays *Sobre piel y papel*. The same year the author published a personal anthology titled *Abro mi sangre*. Her latest novel, *Fe in disfraz*, was published by Alfaguara in 2009.

<sup>2</sup> See Isabelo Cruz Zenón's *Narciso descubre su trasero: el negro en la cultura puertorriqueña* (Editorial Furidi, 1974) for an analyses of Puerto Rican literary works that constructed Spanish/Indian binary as the sole racial identity, writing the *negro* out of the country's history.

<sup>3</sup> Duany's data (2000) differs from the number provided by Santos-Febres, who indicated 10.8 percent of black population. However, the numeric difference of 2.8 percent is not significant to contradict Santos-Febres's argument that black Puerto Ricans are underrepresented on the island.

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