

**THE SCATOLOGICAL SUBJECT:  
IMMIGRATION, EVACUATION, AND THE ABJECT  
IN JUAN BONILLA'S *LOS PRÍNCIPES NUBIOS***

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**Palabras clave:** inmigración, liminal, abyecta, identidad, Juan Bonilla, *Los Príncipes nubios*

**Resumen:** *Los Príncipes nubios* de Juan Bonilla ( 2003 ) , ganadora del Premio Biblioteca Breve , ha llamado la atención por su representación de la inmigración ilegal y el comercio sexual globalizado. El narrador de la novela trabaja para una compañía internacional que rescata gente guapa de las zonas de crisis política o socio- económica al servicio de los clientes del primer mundo como los trabajadores sexuales . Este contrabando corporales problematiza los límites de la identidad nacional, la riqueza de los consumidores , y el valor de una España globalizado. Basándose en la teoría de lo abyecto de Kristeva , este ensayo examina cómo liminal y órganos corporales emisiones encarnan el cruce de fronteras del cuerpo somático como símbolo de la inestabilidad amenazante del organismo nacional en la novela. La evacuación de la morbosa otros de su desgracia para el consumo por parte de España tropos en última instancia la evacuación de los organismos (nacionales ) del cuerpo - la eliminación de las heces a través de la expulsión del inmigrante abyecto , que es necesaria para la integridad corporal y la ética del sujeto española .

**Mots-clés:** immigration, liminal, abject, identité, Juan Bonilla, *Los Principes nubios*

**Résumé :** *Los Principes nubios* de Juan Bonilla (2003), lauréat du Premio Biblioteca Breve, a attiré l'attention par sa représentation de l'immigration illégale et le commerce du sexe mondialisé. Le narrateur du roman travaille pour une compagnie internationale qui sauve de belles personnes de zones en crise politique ou socio-économique au service de clients du premier monde comme les travailleurs du sexe. Cette contrebande corporelle problématise les frontières de l'identité nationale, la fortune des consommateurs, et la valeur d'une Espagne globalisée. S'appuyant sur la théorie de l'abject de Kristeva, cet essai examine comment les organes liminaux et les émissions du corps incarnent le passage de la frontière du corps somatique pour symboliser l'instabilité menaçante de l'organisme national dans le roman. L'évacuation de la morbide, un autre de malheur pour la consommation de la part de l'Espagne produit finalement l'évacuation des organismes (nationaux) du corps -l'élimination des matières fécales par l'expulsion de l'immigrant abject, ce qui est nécessaire à l'intégrité corporelle et éthique du sujet espagnol.

**Keywords:** immigration, liminal, abject, identity, Juan Bonilla, *Los principes nubios*

**Abstract:** Juan Bonilla's *Los principes nubios* (2003), winner of the Premio Biblioteca Breve, has garnered attention for its representation of illegal immigration and the globalized sex trade. The novel's narrator works for an international company that rescues beautiful people from zones of political or socio-economic crisis to service first-world clients as sex workers. This bodily contraband problematizes the boundaries of national identity, consumer wealth, and value in a globalized Spain. Drawing on Kristeva's theory of the abject, this essay examines how liminal organs and bodily emissions incarnate the border-crossing of the somatic body to symbolize the threatening instability of the national body in the novel. The evacuation of the morbid other from his misfortune for consumption by Spain ultimately tropes an evacuation of the (national) body—an elimination of feces through the expulsion of the immigrant abject, which is necessary to the corporeal and ethical integrity of the Spanish subject.

[R]efuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.  
These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands,  
hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death.  
There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.  
—Julia Kristeva

Juan Bonilla's *Los príncipes nubios* (2003), is a novel about bodies—bodies bought and sold, desired and reviled, accepted and expelled; bodies that haunt the border between identity and abjection, and hover in the balance between wholeness and decay. Winner of the Premio Biblioteca Breve, this novel has garnered attention for its representation of illegal immigration, the sex trade, and Spain's role in the globalized world.<sup>1</sup> The novel is narrated by Moisés Froissard, a Spaniard who works for an international company, “el Club Olimpo,” that rescues the most beautiful men, women, and children from stricken zones of war, poverty, and socio-economic crisis. “Me dedico a salvar vidas. Así de fácil,” the narrator proclaims in the opening line. Yet this plot line is not that simple at all, for the evacuees must then choose between conscription as sex workers or

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<sup>1</sup> Juan Bonilla, born in Jerez de la Frontera in 1966, is a journalist for the newspaper *El mundo* and a prolific writer who has published novels, short stories, poetry, and essays. His novels include *Yo soy, yo eres, yo es* (1995), *Nadie conoce a nadie* (1996), which was made into a film by Mateo Gil in 1999, *Cansados de estar muertos* (1999), and *Los príncipes nubios* (2003), which has been translated into ten languages. Basanta (2003), García Torrego (2012) and Rodríguez Fischer (2008) have addressed Bonilla's critical treatment of the capitalist exploitation of immigrants. Gamero de Coca (2011) considers *Los príncipes nubios* as a recent example in a long line of texts that accept prostitution rather than arguing for its abolition.

deportment back to the desperate place from which they came. The ironically named Moisés makes his living by evacuating these bodies from disaster and leading them to the “promised land,” where are dispatched to satisfy the sexual desires of those who dwell on the affluent side of a national boundary or endure unscathed by catastrophe.

This bodily contraband problematizes the boundaries of national identity, consumer wealth, desirability, and value in a globalized Spain. Throughout the novel liminal organs, particularly the skin, the penis, and the anus, and bodily emissions— such as semen, provoked by desire, or blood or pus, produced by corporeal penetration—incarnate the border-crossing of the somatic body to symbolize the threatening instability of the national body.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject and Javier Sáez and Sejo Carrascosa’s concept of anal politics, the present essay focuses on the representation of African immigrants as the exoticized, rejected, and menacing abject in *Los príncipes nubios*. The novel’s imagery embodies African immigrants as the problematically scatological: they are the obscene, that which “should not” be seen, yet is fundamental to the identity of Spain as the abject zone that founds and confounds the Spanish subject.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In their celebration of the centenary of the concept of liminality, the editors of *International Political Anthropology* define the liminal as “in-between situations and conditions that are characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes” (Horvath, Thomassen, and Wydra 2009). For an overview of the history and evolving applications of liminality, see Thomassen (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Bonilla insists in various interviews that the novel is not about immigration, but rather deals with the evolution of its protagonist, with immigration as merely the back-drop. Yet this background itself forms the subject, the protagonist, who defines himself in relation to and against the immigrants he encounters.

Nonetheless, despite the social criticism of immigrant abuse that the novel seems to proffer, it ultimately advances a reductionist view of immigration, especially concerning the representation of the sexualized immigrant African body as a commodity that is beautiful but menacing, violent, and uncontainable. The evacuation of the morbid other from his misfortune for consumption by Spain ultimately tropes an evacuation of the (national) body—an elimination of feces through the expulsion of the immigrant abject, which is necessary to the corporeal and ethical integrity of the Spanish subject.

Kristeva's well-known treatise *Powers of Horror* (1982) proposes the concept of "the abject" to explain the psychic process of revulsion and fascination felt by the human subject in those moments when there is an unsettling blurring of the differences between self and other. In contrast to the *object*, which defines and grounds the subject through its acknowledged opposition, Kristeva avers that the *abject* "is radically excluded and draws me to the place where meaning collapses" (1982: 2). This disturbing, uncanny recognition/rejection of the abject recalls the infant's violent disattachment from body and psyche from the mother in order to become a cohesive subject, which is necessary for entry into the symbolic order in psychoanalytic theory: "abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (Kristeva, 1982: 10).

Later abjections –forces or experiences that unsettle the ego– are haunting repetitions of this primary event. Kristeva posits the liminal experience of the body through death or bodily fluids as examples of later encounters with the abject:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall) [...] upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and

fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death –a flat encephalograph, for instance,– I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit-*cadere*, cadaver (1982: 3).

The abject, then, is the haunting outside that reminds the subject of what must be expelled and excluded in order to contour identity as intact and functional. As Taylor (2009) surmises, Kristeva associates the abject with “all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies and, in particular, those aspects of bodily experience which unsettle singular bodily integrity: death, decay, fluids, orifices, sex, defecation, vomiting, illness, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth” (1982: 79-80). Kristeva further suggests that this phenomenon undergirds cultural and political practices of inclusion and exclusion, operating on the social as well as the singular level. Hence the abject is a figure of subjective border-crossing for the individual and the body politics, a reminder of the unstable and non-integral identity that depends on what must be repudiated in order to exist.

Immigrants from Africa rouse the specter of the abject for Spanish identity with particular intensity, given the centuries of political and cultural influence between the two continents. Scholars have documented the relationship of colonization and conquest between

Spain and Africa since medieval times, and the ways those tensions have influenced contemporary attitudes toward Africans in Spain. Susan Martin-Márquez's *Disorientations: Spanish Colonialism in Africa and the Performance of Identity* (2008) considers Spain as a unique case omitted from Edward Said's famous model of Orientalism, which explores how the West defines itself in opposition to the East. Martin-Márquez observes that the subject/object relationship is complicated in Spain's history with Africa, for Spain has been both the colonizer and the colonized:

the post-Enlightenment 're-discovery' of the Andalusí past led Spaniards and foreigners alike to Orientalize the Iberian nation. While some of the Spanish elite reveled in self-exoticization, others responded anxiously by projecting their 'own' alterity onto the 'usual suspects' in Africa and the Middle East—but also onto other Spaniards. In this sense, Spain is a nation that is at once Orientalized and Orientalizing...For Spaniards, this positioning on both 'sides' of Orientalism—as simultaneously 'self' and 'other'—may bring about a profound sense of 'disorientation' (2008: 8-9).

Her thesis corroborates Daniela Flesler's contention in *The Return of the Moor* (2008): "Spain finds itself in a particular double bind as both a culture that has repressed the 'oriental' and Semitic elements of its historical identity, constructing them as its others, and the 'close-to-home' Orient to other Europeans" (2008: 21).<sup>4</sup> The Iberian

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the double bind of Spanish Orientalism, see Flesler (2008:17-54), as well as Charnon-Deutsch (1995) and Colmeiro (2002).

nation's reactions throughout history to instances of problematic doubling of identity roles or to occlusion of the boundary between Spain/Africa "reveal Spain's deep anxiety over the demarcation of national belonging" (Flesler, 2008: 9).<sup>5</sup> Building on this existing criticism, the present essay considers how Bonilla's acclaimed novel problematizes and propagates Spain's contentious relation with Africans who penetrate its borders.

On one level, *Los príncipes nubios* posits a critique of Spain's treatment of immigrants, through its first-person narrator whose apathy toward all those around him leads him to become one of the perpetrators of the prostitution system. His apathy and hollow self-justification, juxtaposed with the galvanizing abuses he recounts, implicitly produce a textual critique of the situation. Moisés justifies crimes against immigrants as "una gota más que incrementaba el ya caudaloso océano de la delincuencia contra inmigrantes –que a fin de cuentas es una máquina que le viene muy bien al Estado para compensar la avalanchas de 'sin papeles'" (Bonilla, 2003: 83). On a flight to Argentina in search of desperate recruits, he finds other passengers are also en route to plunder the society of the goods it can no longer afford, such as works of art:

un avión lleno de depredadores que acuden solícitos y urgentes al derrumbe de una sociedad entera [...] Sí, iba camino de convertirme en un devorador, pero mi misión

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<sup>5</sup> Further important studies on the impact and perception of immigration in Spain at the turn of the millennium include those by Checa, Checa and Arjona (2000), Goytisolo and Naïr (2000), Agrela (2002), Andrés-Suárez et al (2002), Bañón Hernández (2002), Richardson (2002), Nair (2006), Cornejo-Parriego (2007), Sampedro Vizcaya and Doubleday (2008), Kleiner-Leibau (2009), Ricci (2010), and Ugarte (2010).



no consistía precisamente en roerle los huesos a los cadáveres que me encontrara, sino en sacar del pozo de mierda en el que estaban a los ejemplares más hermosos, los que merecían otro destino que el que les tenía deparado la mala suerte (Bonilla, 2003: 98).

His rationalization resonates with pathetic vacuity, for readers are aware that the other passengers will obtain objects to sell, whereas the narrator pursues human beings. In fact, the moral dilemma he ponders on the plane is rendered with readers in mind:

Oh, qué blandita es toda esa argumentación, nos vas a hacer llorar, dirán ustedes, qué tierno, qué sensible. ¿Está bien, está mal? Eran preguntas que carecían de sentido, se les había evaporado la sustancia antes de que el avión aterrizase en Ezeiza. La única pregunta moral correcta de los tiempos que nos tocaron es: ¿es rentable lo que vas a hacer? ¿obtendrá beneficios? Me dirán: menudo lavado de cerebro le hicieron al cabeza de chorlito este que fe capaz de creerse ese cuento chino para adularse a sí mismo y no colgarse una etiqueta nefasta antes de tiempo. Vale, es posible, pero trato de recobrar al jovencuelo aquel (Bonilla, 2003: 99).

In the one-sided rhetorical debate with readers, the narrator distances himself from the experiencing protagonist, explaining he was trying to recapture what that person was thinking—the person who quelled his conscience in order to hunt beautiful, miserable creatures for the Club. This doubling and distancing of the narrator/protagonist suggests some sort of transformation that takes place in the protagonist, which will be drive the plot. The philosophical debates the narrator holds with himself and with readers throughout

the novel transport readers on a potentially scopophilic journey along with the protagonist, wherein they witness the enjoyment and abuse of immigrant bodies and survey the psychological justifications that enable those actions to occur.

In an important strategy that distances readers from identifying with the protagonist, the novel suggests that the view afforded by Moisés is intended to be a distortion, a twenty-first century esperpentic exaggeration of reality designed to provoke a reaction. The protagonist, and the text, thus ostensibly serve as a deformed mirror that accentuates and exaggerates qualities of Spanish identity in order to critique social reality, similar to Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *esperpento* (Belausteguigoitia, 2003; Velázquez Jordán, 2003). Moisés asserts that his effect on everyone is to deform their view and bring out the worst in them:

como si mi misión en esta tierra [...] Fuese servir de espejo deformador de todo el que se acercase a mí [...] lo que había debajo, lo que descubrían al rascar un poco, era una naturaleza sorprendente que les iba devolviendo una imagen desasosegadora de sí mismos (Bonilla, 2003: 27).

What lies beneath the surface of the mirror is of course not at all what is reflected in the glass, but a completely separate entity—a layer of silver or some other substance that reflects back the image of the viewer. Yet the narrator shifts the metaphor from the mirror to figure identity also as a surface, a skin, which could be scratched to reveal the disquieting “truth” that lies beneath. In the overlapping of metaphors, the passage ultimately suggests that the disturbing nature lurking beneath the scratched surface of the skin, of the self, is the specter of otherness, an opaque surface of difference that reflects the truth of the self as deformation.

The image of the skin is represented throughout the novel as the shell that conceals and reveals identity, as well as the surface that separates and connects the self and the other. It is useful here to recall thinkers such as Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (2001), Claudia Benthien (2002), and Jacques Derrida (2005), who have studied skin as the physical boundary that mediates between the subject and its surroundings, “the symbolic surface between the self and the world” (Benthien, 2002: 1). Derrida (2005) underscores the preeminence of touch, and hence skin, accorded in the philosophical tradition: “Touch may well exist apart from the other senses, but Aristotle stresses that without it, no other sense would exist” (2005: 24).<sup>6</sup> Skin is the primary organ for the sense of touch, the first of the five faculties to develop in humans. Benthien (2002) observes that the skin and the brain are formed from the same embryonic membrane, the ectoderm. The perceptions communicated through the skin are thus appropriately merged in such phrases as “I feel” and “I am touched by,” connoting a linkage between physical states and mental attitudes (Benthien, 2002: 7). The skin as surface, then, is a liminal site of interface and equivalence between body and identity, and self and other. As Benthien has observed, the notion of skin as the demarcation of subjectivity has become ever more pronounced, in contrast to continuing scientific discoveries of what lies beneath the bodily surface:

the integument of the body has become an increasingly rigid boundary in spite of the fact that medicine has penetrated the skin and exposed the interior of the body.

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<sup>6</sup> Derrida’s *On Touching—Jean Luc Nancy* (2005) provides an overview of the philosophical treatment of the sense of touch from Plato and Aristotle up to the end of the twentieth century.

In the twentieth century, at the latest, skin [...] became the central metaphor of separateness. It is only at this boundary that subjects can encounter each other. (Ben-thien, 2002: 1).

With so much meaning attached to the shell of the body, the analysis of the cultural perceptions of skin as the enclosure of identity goes far beyond “skin deep.” “Thinking through the skin,” Ahmed and Stacey contend, “is a thinking that reflects [...] on inter-embodiment, on the mode of being-with and being-for, where one touches and is touched by others” (2001: 1).

In *Los príncipes nubios* the skin serves as a trope for identity penetrated or plastered by the abject. Perhaps the most vivid representation of the skin and the abject occurs when Moisés goes to Málaga on the orders of his boss, La Doctora, the Director of the Barcelona branch of the Club. She has become obsessed with finding a particular African immigrant after “a client,” later revealed to be the Doctor herself, sees his photograph in the paper and wants to purchase him for sex. She sends Moisés to Málaga to hunt the African, whom she plans to market to Club clients as “el príncipe nubio” from a tribe of Africans in southern Sudan known for their exceptional beauty, their fighting skill, and their oppression by Islamic extremists. Upon arriving at the Málaga airport, Moisés discovers that the garbage workers of the city have been on strike for ten days, causing stench to cleave to the air: “El aire estaba congestionado de un pegajoso olor a podredumbre, y supimos, oyendo a otros viajeros que esperaban sus equipajes, que la situación en la ciudad era de caos absoluto” (Bonilla, 2003: 135). The stinking garbage that overwhelms the city is a direct metaphor for the immigrants who also seem to have taken over, according to a local Spanish hotel worker: “Hay muchos [negros], están por todas partes. De

noche ya no se puede salir [...] todo el día te los encuentras vagando por ahí, es una epidemia, peor que la basura [...]” (Bonilla, 2003: 142). When Moisés finally departs Málaga, after a series of intense interactions with immigrants, his description of the view from the plane culminates the metaphor of the city as a fragile casing bursting open to spew forth its viscera:

Pude ver allá abajo cómo la basura se había apropiado de la arteria principal que corre paralela al paseo marítimo, donde cientos de coches habían quedado aprisionados. En el paseo marítimo también había miles de bolsas de basura rotas, mierda desperdigada por todas partes. Era... una metáfora suprema de que en aquel instante concentraba todas mis opiniones acerca del mundo, o de mi propio mundo [...] una ciudad enterrada en su propia basura (Bonilla, 2003: 237).

The city is a skin split open, spilling entrails all over itself. The image is one of stench, of sickness, of blockage and paralysis from being overrun by the abject that should be contained.

The association of immigrants with the abject reaches a sensory crescendo in a scene witnessed by Moisés in the airport, when police march a caravan of illegal immigrants past the passengers. Moisés and the other travelers waiting in lines have begun to realize that the stench is too intense to be caused by mere garbage, when they discover its source:

Debían ser más de treinta africanos. Se habían embadurnado de heces para que los policías que los escoltaban no pudieran agarrarlos y meterlos en el vuelo especial con que pondrían fin a su sueño de permanecer en la tierra

prometida. Algunos iban apresados en grupo mediante cinta aislante. El espectáculo era aterrador y no se me ocurrió sacar la Leica para captar algún instante decisivo. La mayoría de los africanos seguía a un ronco lamento unánime que tenía algo de himno sobrecogedor y algo de plegaria de víctima insalvable [...] tuvimos que protegernos las narices y hacer todo lo posible por reprimir el vómito. No todos los viajeros que esperaban en la sala a que emergiesen los equipajes lo consiguieron, y el suelo brillante se llenó de lunares anaranjados y nauseabundos. (Bonilla, 2003: 137).

Here the African immigrants are the abject incarnate. They coat their skin with excrement in the hope that Spanish authorities will be too repelled by the literal abject on the cutis, the border of the self, to expel the figurative abject—the immigrants—from the national corpus. This spectacle of the abject brings to life the (ob)scene, that which “should not,” yet must, be seen. The feces evacuated from the body call into question both the “life-saving” evacuations that the protagonist performs for his job and the political evacuations undertaken by the Spanish authorities in the airport. It is the crudest unveiling and questioning of the identity that is formed by expulsion of the other from the bounds of privilege. This encounter with the abject provokes sensory overload for the spectators, as the stench and specter of feculent skin and the lament of those encased in it compel the privileged witnesses to effectuate their own bodily abjection of their disgust, by vomiting. In a further enactment of the psychic drama that expels and silences the abject from identity, the authorities beat the prisoners who resist, shooting duct tape around them to turn them into “una caricatura de momia” (Bonilla, 2003: 137), the embodiment of the silenced, walking dead.

Whereas the skin smeared with fecal matter underscores and interrogates the abjection of “bodies that matter,” to borrow Judith Butler’s term, in other parts of the novel the skin of the self is similarly featured as a problematic matter of identity. This is seen most notably in the affliction of intense genital itching that the protagonist suffers with no apparent medical cause:

Hace tiempo que padezco una avería de la psique que ha elegido un formato cómico para darse a conocer: picores. En cuanto me acuesto empiezan a picarme los testículos. Ríanse, están en su derecho. Es una tragedia que no ha solucionado ningún dermatólogo [...] Ya he empezado a llamarlo ‘lo mío,’ porque carezco de nombre que darle. He aceptado que es un castigo que se me ha impuesto, y que el lugar que ha elegido mi culpa para manifestarse sea precisamente ése no puede ser más significativo (Bonilla, 2003: 59).

The itching—which besets him at first when he lies down at night, but increasingly occupies his days as well—becomes an obsession that governs the protagonist’s mind as well as his body. To alleviate the torture, at times he remains standing up throughout the night, other times he distracts himself with masturbation, but often he winds up scratching to the point of shredding his skin:

A veces me rascaba con tanta rabia que me acababa haciendo heridas en la piel, entonces las cosas empeoraban, el escozor me hacía maldecir mi rabia y mi poco dominio sobre mí mismo, y no sólo me jodía la vida, como el picor, cuando de noche me tendía en la cama, sino a todas horas: caminaba como si me hubiera sodomizado Mazinger Z. (Bonilla, 2003: 82).

The cuts that erupt on the surface of the genitals are the corporeal manifestation of inner conflict over a sense of guilt, perhaps for his abuse of others, or perhaps for his hidden homosexual desires. Indeed, events in the novel suggest that Moisés's lack of control over his body stands in for his lack of control over his desire. The itching thus represents the conflict of body and mind, of skin/identity set against the brain; skin and brain, formed from a single membrane, act in friction with one another and burst the integral whole. In the passage just cited, the pustules on the skin constitute an opening that is then juxtaposed with the mocking comparison of walking as if Moisés had been violently sodomized. The leaking skin, like the anus, represents a liminal passageway where the boundary between the self and the other are dangerously and fearfully ruptured. Both the skin and the anus are figures of the Kristevan abject in the novel. They are the wounded, seeping site of refuse and refusal—a reminder of the desire for the same that menacingly haunts the separation of the self as an integral subject. With the itching, the skin manifests what the mind cannot admit, turning the subject against itself when body and mind are at odds.

The above-cited passage implies homosexual desire and fear as the source of the identity conflict, an association that is borne out more overtly later in the novel. Significantly, the itching subsides during Moisés's encounter with "el príncipe nubio," whose name is Boo. Boo makes his living by fighting for a gambling ring that provides illicit, highly profitable entertainment for the affluent Spaniards and other viewers who can afford the price of watching two men beat one another, sometimes to the death. Given that the Doctor promises Moisés money and career advancement if he can locate and recruit the African immigrant, Boo becomes the object of desire that propels the plot as well as the development of the protagonist. The narrator's initial description of Boo, when he first



sees him in the fighting ring, is one that borders on cliché in its exoticization of the black man:

Boca sensual de labios carnosos, de esos que son fácilmente caricaturizables [...] Los deltoides parecían dibujados por uno de aquellos maestros escultores del Renacimiento que luego tallaban en piedra a los dioses con los que soñaban. Pero lo más sensual eran las piernas, largas, impecables, no demasiado musculadas, aparentemente, de piel brillante y apetecible (Bonilla, 2003: 204).

As García Torrego (2012) observes, Boo “está rodeado de un halo mítico, de héroe” (Bonilla, 2003: 13). In this passage the body is objectified and fragmented into sensual parts, as the fleshy lips, long legs, and luminous skin inspire desire from afar. When the narrator finally is able to talk personally with Boo, the physical description is still exoticized and fetishized:

en su mirada brilló un hielo antiguo. La dentadura era un puñado de nieve pura, y en los labios monumentales noté leves grietas que enseguida él borró [...] tomando un buche de agua y pasando luego la lengua rápida y rosada –más cerca del blanco que del rojo– por la superficie de sus labios (Bonilla, 2003: 223-24).

The notion of the ancient, glacial gaze elevates the man to the clichéd status of exotic and remote other, whose black skin offsets his snowy white teeth to accentuate his difference. The narrator then focalizes on the mouth as the metonymy of the exotic body; he watches with intent focus that discloses desire as Boo licks his lips to relieve the painful cracks, which constitute yet more openings in the boundary between self and other. The protagonist’s absorption

with Boo yields relief from the obsessive itching when he listens to Boo relay the story of his past. In those moments, mind and body are no longer in conflict, but united in longing. They are riveted by the story and the body of the abject, who has now become the object of desire.

In addition to the itching skin, the protagonist's body manifests his struggles with sexuality by his difficulty in maintaining an erection, a condition that begins after he becomes a hunter for the Club. Part of the conflict seems to relate to his inability to admit his homosexual desire, which is socially allied with the abject—that which must be repudiated and expelled in order for the self to be whole. Consequently, the narrator strives to occlude his desire, even to the point of creating a neologism to circumvent the truth of his sexuality:

Siempre que hasta entonces me preguntaba a mí mismo por esas cosas, por cómo a veces me levantaba el deseo la contemplación del cuerpo de algún macho hermoso, en la playa, en una galería de arte [...] me respondía: eres etereosexual. Supongo que eso significaba, o aspiraba a significar, que no me atrevería a llevar el apetito por algunos machos más allá de la mera fantasía, no iba a dar ningún paso para probarlo, como otras veces y con otras tantas cosas, dejaría que las circunstancias decidieran por mí y si alguna vez se presentaban propicias, adelante, y si no. Me conformaría con silenciar el deseo ante los otros y fijar su verdadera estatura cuando cerrara los ojos para dormirme (Bonilla, 2003: 92-93).

Moisés's attraction to the same sex is something he feels he must silence and disguise through language as something else; it is the obscene which he must relegate to the unseen when he closes his eyes.

Javier Sáez and Sejo Carrascosa (2011) call attention to the mandate of silence attendant to anal attraction. They note the etymological linkage between the word *sphincter* and its Greek origin, *sphinx*:

El ano está rodeado de unos músculos denominados *esfínteres*; su raíz etimológica proviene de la voz griega *sphinx*, por lo que comparte su origen con la esfinge, criatura de origen mitológico que guarda misterios y enigmas [...]. *Esfinge* deriva, en griego, de estrechar, ligar, anudar (de allí, el músculo anular ‘esfíntero’), y encarna metafóricamente en el monstruo imaginario que anula a la mujer y al león (Sáez, Sejo Carrascosa, 2011: 37-38).

Anal desire, then, is associated not just with Freudian retention and repression, but with liminality, monstrosity, mystery, and silence.

In their study of anal politics, Sáez and Carrascosa (2011) analyze how the social denigration of the anus is manifested in attitudes and language. They present a series of idiomatic insults centering on anal penetration in a host of Western languages:

la penetración anal como sujeto pasivo está en el centro del lenguaje, del discurso social, como lo abyecto, lo horrible, lo malo, lo peor. Todas estas expresiones traducen un valor primordial, unánime, generalizado: ser penetrado es algo indeseable, un castigo, una tortura, un acto odioso, una humillación, algo doloroso, la pérdida de la hombría, es algo donde jamás se podría encontrar placer (Sáez, Carrascosa, 2011: 17).

Scholars such as Richard Trexler (1995) and John Boswell (1980) have demonstrated the historical denigration of sexual penetration as linked to disdain for passivity and subjugation. The penetrator is

viewed as a position of power that occupies literally or metaphorically the primary pole in all binary relationships. Such critics call attention to the importance of the anus as the abject that is excluded in order to affirm heterosexual norms based on rigid binaries of power and subjection:

El culo es un espacio político. Es un lugar donde se articulan discursos, prácticas, vigilancias, miradas, exploraciones, prohibiciones, escarnios, odios, asesinatos, enfermedades [...] para entender las causas y las condiciones de la homofobia, del machismo y de la discriminación en general tenemos que entender cómo se relaciona lo anal con el sexo, con el género, con la masculinidad, con las relaciones sociales (Sáez, Carrascosa, 2011: 63-64).

As Trexler (1995) affirms, “both the past and the present made politics by sexual force, showing the power of the sexual posture as a political gesture” (Trexler, 1995: 178). Thus the potentially destabilizing power of the anus lies in its status as a political space: “El culo parece muy democrático, todo el mundo tiene uno” (Sáez, Carrascosa, 2011: 14). The anus as a “democratic” site of corporeal penetration is not an organ tied to reproduction, nor limited to sex, nor exclusive to one gender; hence in anal politics power is no longer the domain of just a few. Through the exclusion of the anus, these critics argue, the system of binary power manifested through sex is sustained.

Similar to Sáez and Carrascosa, Beatriz Preciado (2008) underscores the oppositionality of the anus and the mouth as zones that operationalize the gendered norms of sexuality and power. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, she argues that the closure of the anus contrasts to the openness of the mouth, the right to speak:

El ano, como centro de producción de placer [...] no tiene género, no es ni masculino ni femenino, produce un cortocircuito en la división sexual, es un centro de pasividad primordial, lugar abyecto por excelencia próximo del detritus y de la mierda [...] Occidente dibuja un tubo con dos orificios, una boca emisora de signos públicos y un ano impenetrable, y enrolla en torno a estos una subjetividad masculina y heterosexual que adquiere estatus de cuerpo social privilegiado (2008: 59-60).<sup>7</sup>

Male heterosexuals are admonished to keep the anus closed as a founding prohibition that affords them the right to speak out as dominant subjects of power. Sáez and Carrascosa call this maximum privatization:

Los hombres pueden hablar en público, pero no se les debe dar por el culo. Por el contrario, el proceso de producción de la subjetividad femenina heterosexual exigirá una privatización de la boca (privatización de signos emitidos) y una apertura pública del ano y de la vagina, técnicamente regulada. Las mujeres tienen que callarse y son penetrables (2011: 73).

The silence of the sphinx correlating with the openness of the sphincter as a passive sexual recipient bears interesting repercussions for the narrator's avoidance of naming his sexual desire in *Los príncipes nubios*.

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<sup>7</sup> Beatriz Preciado further develops this concept of the anus as an ungendered and political space in *Manifiesto contrasexual* (2011).

In light of the sphinx/sphincter connection, the narrator's proclamation of "eterosexualidad" in the passage cited above expresses an unarticulated, disembodied, ethereal desire, a desire without gender restrictions and identifications that is meant to cloak the narrator's homosexual desire. This sphinx-like silence about his sexual preferences is a constriction that strives to conceal his "monstruous" desire for the sphincter. When the Doctor asks Moisés if hunting men for the Club will be a problem for him, he says no, and uses the appellation "eterosexual" evasively to describe his sexual tendencies. "Fantástico," the Doctor replies. "Por una sola letra no pertenecemos al mismo grupo, porque yo, ya lo comprobarás, soy estereosexual: lo único que busco en alguien es que me haga gritar" (Bonilla, 2003: 94). This play on words is all the funnier because one might expect the one-letter difference to refer to the Castilian pronunciation of "heterosexual" with the silent "h," which would be lacking only the third "e" of "eterosexual." But rather than conforming to heterosexual norms, the Doctor proclaims her sexuality as "estereosexual"— she desires anyone who can consume her and make her vociferously lose control. Rather than skirting the issue of sexual desire with silence, the Doctor coins her own word play that proclaims the goal of her sexuality and suggests what the protagonist's aim should be as well: unbridled, stereophonic pleasure. Her sexuality surpasses the systemic gender norms of masculine/feminine that mandate that silence convey penetrability and that impenetrability confer the right to speak. Far from being penetrable, passive, and silent, the Doctor is adaptable, potent, and stereophonic, opening all orifices of the body at will.

Despite the novel's candid discussion of sexual desire, and its critical representation of exploiting the poor for the benefit of the wealthy in globalized Spain, what troubles me most about *Los príncipes nubios* is that ultimately it seems to reproduce and reinforce the

very abjectification of African immigrants and homosexual desire that it otherwise problematizes. After the protagonist's longstanding bout with impotence, for instance, his first physical manifestation of desire is homosexual and occurs in a scene that abounds with psychoanalytic clichés. When he is stuck in stench-ridden Málaga, Moisés learns that his mother has just died (through suicide, he surmises) and he reflects on the maternal relationship as essentially one of emotional abandonment, although the mother was physically present in his life. On the day of her funeral in Barcelona, he enters a church in Málaga and feels excited by a *retablo* of a young, nude, beautiful male saint being tortured by soldiers bedecked in grandeur:

La escena era excitante y me sorprendí al notar que se me abultaba la entrepierna [...] Que extraño es el deseo, ese zarpazo repentino en medio de la mañana cóncava, que te envuelve con una malla y te reduce –o quizá te agranda– aniquilando todo lo personal y falseado que haya en ti, transformándote en puro instinto y necesidad. (Bonilla, 2003: 155).

The death of the mother, the setting of the Church that oppresses his sexuality, and the spectacle of violence and subjugation unleash what is “puro instinto y necesidad,” his true desire. This clichéd view posits homosexual desire as morbid in nature, born of neglect, loss, abuse, and oppression.

Toward the end of the novel the narrator still struggles against admitting his homosexual desire, even to himself. After he has convinced Boo to work for the Club, and turned him over along with Irene, another African immigrant with whom he felt a strong bond, he finds himself fantasizing about the two, who were to be marketed as a sexual pair, “los príncipes nubios”:

No pasó un solo día –podría exagerar y decir que ni una sola hora– sin que pensara en los príncipes nubios [...] no siempre los utilizaban para desamuermar mi inapetencia, o al menos no los utilizaba a los dos, poco a poco fui dirimiendo mis preferencias, pero me cuidaba mucho de aclarármelo del todo, siempre dejaba un resquicio para la duda o para desmentirme (Bonilla, 2003: 252).

Even though the protagonist's imaginings display a strong tendency toward one body rather than the other, at first he won't admit his homosexual desire even to himself, using the image of the couple to occlude his desire for the man. Finally, Moisés discloses the object of desire:

No sé adjetivar qué tipo de sensación acogía cuando el pensamiento se me fugaba hacia la figura de Boo. Rebobinaba en la memoria su antológico combate con el marine, y no podía negarme que aquello que me agujereaba la boca del estómago y extendía una caravana de cosquillas desde allí a la base de mi pubis se llamaba deseo. Y no era deseo, sin embargo, lo que me atropellaba cuando fijaba la atención en Irene (Bonilla, 2003: 253).

Nonetheless, a few pages later when the Doctor interrogates him about his sexual preferences, he is persistently evasive. The protagonist resists speaking about homosexual desire, reinforcing it as the unspeakable.

When Moisés finally acts upon his feelings for Boo, catastrophe ensues in a telling plot twist that enacts castigation for violation of normative heterosexual desire. Moisés pays the Doctor an exorbitant sum to be allowed to be the first trial client for Boo and Irene, after



they have been training to perform as a sexual team. Since he cannot afford to pay the price of actually having sex with them, he is only allowed to watch. During their performance on the futon in his hotel room, he moves to sit down next to them to get a better view. This corporeal encroachment provokes violence:

Y en ese momento, sin que yo hubiera avanzado una mano para acariciar un palmo de piel de alguno de los dos [...] Boo se quitó de encima a su compañera de manera violenta y me cogió del cuello. No pude decir nada. Recuerdo que me extrañó que el tamaño de su polla no fuera excepcional, y que su bálano fuera de un color molesto, rosa palo [...] Los ojos de Boo arrojaban hielo negro que hacía germinar en el fondo de mi cerebro un pánico angustiados. Mi nuca presionaba contra la pared y mis manos se aferraban a la muñeca de la mano con la que Boo me cortaba el aliento [...] Como si controlase perfectamente el tiempo idóneo para provocarle el desmayo a alguien, Boo aflojó su mano sobre mi cuello justo cuando creí que iba a perder el sentido. Caí al suelo doblado sobre mí mismo, buscando con la boca aire que llevar al fondo de mis pulmones, los ojos abiertos al lado de los pies del nubio: en el empeine había unas cuantas manchas blancas más, y en mi cerebro apareció la palabra vitíligo (Bonilla, 2003: 270-71).

The description of the beating is too lengthy to cite here in full, yet each detail of blows to the body accentuates the violence of the onslaught by the hulking immigrant who has been trained to pummel bodies to the brink of death or beyond. Moisés no longer interprets Boo's gaze as a glacial white that awakens desire, but now views the livid eyes as black ice that emanate danger.

In the midst of the beating described in the passage cited above, the narrator continues to fragment Boo's body as before, but now he focuses on physical aberrations that suggest inferiority. The protagonist fixates in his delirium on the unexpectedly compact size of Boo's penis, and finds its pale pink skin a disturbing contrast to the ebony of the rest of the body. The diminishment of the phallus plays into the Spanish need to be and boast the mightier member in Spain/African relations. Just as the light skin of the penis unsettles the Spaniard with its light hue, the patches of vitiligo on Boo's feet also become a point of fixation for Moisés. The loss of pigment in the African's skin visually evokes the intermingling of black and white, the blot of one color encroaching on the other, which earlier in the novel he had identified as the scant flaws in the otherwise-perfect specimen of sexuality. The discoloration is rendered as diseased imperfection that must be eradicated so that the black body can be used, wholly intact in its otherness, for the pleasure of the white in the Club's business. Even as the Spaniard is beaten by the immigrant, he focuses on the liminal sites of penis and skin to reinforce his sense of superiority and to ostracize the African as abject.

The scene culminates with Boo sodomizing the protagonist, yet the sexual encounter is not recounted directly, for Moisés falls unconscious first from the pain of the assault on the rest of his body. Instead, the narrator relays what the Doctor told him she found after she arrived at his apartment:

se encontró algo parecido a mi cadáver en el cuarto de baño, con la cabeza metida en el váter, y un charco de sangre que manaba de entre mis nalgas: el nubio había decidido concluir su fiesta violándome, un desgarró que necesitó diez puntos [...] Me dolían huesos que ignoraba

que tenía. La nariz era una especie de melocotón del que salía sangre constante que iba empapando vendas sin cesar: un grifo que no había manera de cerrar. Tenía que respirar por la boca, con lo que comer resultaba una operación indigna pues tenía que masticar apresuradamente para volver a tomar aire antes de quedarme sin él y tener que hacerlo con restos de comida danzándose aún en el interior de la boca. (Bonilla, 2003: 272).

With his head immersed in the toilet, the protagonist now occupies the quintessential space for evacuating the abject. Indeed, his very body has become the abject, as the revealed by the description of his rectum, torn nearly beyond repair, and his nose—a metaphorical substitute for the penis which was denied the chance to act on its desire—pummeled into mushy, malleable flesh like a ripe peach. The corporeal lines of liminality between self and other have been devastated. As evidenced by the unstaunchable stream of blood, Moisés himself has become the abjected body beyond the bounds of control, the body that leaks beyond containment and that can scarcely sustain itself with breath. Importantly, this violation is reconstructed third-hand, as if the anal rape of the Spaniard by the African were too horrific for direct recall.

The protagonist's transformation into the abject himself seems to alter him. At the end of the novel, after his body has mostly healed, Moisés is called by a paid contact to come inspect some immigrants who were shipwrecked while trying to infiltrate the Spanish coast. The contact is sure Moisés will want to purchase one in particular, so Moisés goes to inspect the merchandise:

[...] allí estaba, Boo, acurrucado, el rostro metido entre los brazos, tiritando, demacrado, vulnerable como nunca lo

había visto... Nos miramos un rato. Advertí que él hacía esfuerzos por contener el llanto, no sé si por culpa de un dolor o por efecto del desinfectante, que se te metía en los ojos y te obligaba a defenderte con lágrimas, pero aun así me mantuvo la mirada, haciendo todo lo posible por calmar el castañeteo de los dientes, tensando la mandíbula, abandonando la manta que le habían dado para que se protegiera del frío que se le había colado en las entrañas. (Bonilla, 2003: 286-87).

In this passage Boo embodies the abject, oozing fluids uncontrollably. He shivers and trembles back and forth in an embodiment of the liminal. He and the protagonist look at one another, however, as equal subjects –“Nos miramos un rato”– equal in their abjection, perhaps, in the view of the narrator. The narrator considers himself to be transformed, after examining his past, telling it, and having the epiphany that he was protecting himself with the bodies of these immigrants: “Así había ido salvando mi vida yo, cubriéndome con todos aquellos cuerpos” (Bonilla, 2003: 249). So he pays the price to purchase Boo, but orders his contact with the local immigration authorities to set the man free. This evacuation of Boo is presented as absolution, a liberation of the other who violated the self and the self who violated the other.

Nonetheless, even if Moisés forgives and seeks to free the Nubian Prince at the end of the novel in penance for having captured and capitalized on his flesh, in this tale of Spanish subjectivity the African still commits the anal invasion of the Spanish body, individually and nationally. Normative Spanish identity is sustained as dependent upon rejection of the African and homosexuality. Indeed, at the end of his story the narrator reveals that he now complies with his own self-prohibition of “nunca más con chicos,” except in

his fantasies. As Gema Pérez-Sánchez (2012) has rightly observed, the protagonist's homosexual desire is met with his "comeuppance" when he is raped. Freedom of the African other might be warranted, the novel suggests, but the facts behind the fear remain. The esperpentic effect of the novel could arguably be seen to mock the Spanish propensity to fear subjugation by the African, rendering a more positive interpretation of the text. Ultimately, however, the violent anal rape that devastates the Spaniard also reinforces and reinscribes the deep-seated cultural prejudices in Spain against the African invader. In this way the novel reinforces the fear of homosexuality by linking it with the specter of the invading African who sodomizes the Spanish male, which in turn embodies fears of the violation of national borders.

This image of corporeal violence echoes and revives centuries of cultural anxiety over Africans in Iberia, inscribed in history and literature.<sup>8</sup> Unlike other renderings of African anal "invasion" that question the contours of Spanish/African identities, such as Najat El Hachmi's novel *L'últim patriarca*, Bonilla's novel fails to speak of the immigrant without abjecting him to reinforce the tenuous boundaries of the Spanish subject.<sup>9</sup> Despite the apparent effort

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<sup>8</sup> Boswell (1980), Trexler (1995), Flesler (2008), Martin-Márquez (2008), Sáez and Carrascosa (2011), and Folkart (forthcoming), among other critics, discuss the manifestation of anal fear in Peninsular literature over the course of history. Scholars such as Flesler (2008), Martin-Márquez (2008), and Ricci (2010) have emphasized the dangers of Spanish novelists speaking for the immigrant other, an act that too often depicts the other an object that still reifies the Spanish subject as center. They attend to the importance of African immigrant voices such as Laila Karouch, Najat El Hachmi, or Donato Ndongongo Bidyogo, who speak for themselves as novelists.

<sup>9</sup> See Folkart (forthcoming).

to critique the Spanish treatment of immigrants in *Los príncipes nubios*, the novel ultimately perpetrates their abjectification and propagates Peninsular fears of the African other as a (sexual) threat to the integrity of Spanish identity. With its preoccupation with the abject and the formation of Spanish subjectivity through African expulsion, the novel reveals that the scatological subject is ultimately the Spaniard, not merely the African. Indeed, when the protagonist “releases” Boo, he presumes that Boo will return to the illegal fighting rings in Spain; thus Moisés perpetuates the capitalist exploitation of immigrant bodies to help sustain the Spanish economy. Even this evacuation, this saving of a life, then, is a figural evacuation of the abject: Boo is expelled to the eclipsed outside that is paradoxically inside, for it sustains the functioning of the scatological subject. This is the final function of the abject in society, for Kristeva: to revive the specter of what was expelled in order to experience the fear of separation, and then expunge the abject and reassert the boundaries of identity once more as founded on that repudiation. Literature, she suggests, is aptly suited to interrogate the slippage of identity borders in its exploration of the abject:

all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted, no matter what its sociohistorical conditions might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—double, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject (1982: 207).

The challenge for Spanish authors, I would aver, is to write about issues such as immigration and sexuality without re-inscribing the other as the abject evacuated and eliminated by the subject; to

explore, instead, the liminal frontiers of alterity and abjection in a productive interrogation of the stakes and strategies of identity formation and expulsion.

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