

The White Male as Narrative Axis in Mayra Santos-Febres's *Nuestra señora de la noche*

Helene C. Weldt-Basson
Michigan State University

Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer is a legendary figure in Puerto Rican culture who has served as the subject of at least two short stories, a film, and a novel. In the 1970s, both Rosario Ferré and Manuel Ramos Otero published tales about this famous prostitute in the journal *Zona de Carga y Descarga* 'Loading and Unloading Zone.' Ferré's story, "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres," 'When Women Love Men' later became a part of her first collection of short stories, *Papeles de Pandora* (1976) 'The Youngest Doll' (1991) while Otero's piece, "La última plena que bailó Luberza" 'The Last Plena that Luberza Danced' subsequently appeared in his collection *El cuento de la mujer del mar* (1979) 'The Story of the Woman of the Sea.' This theme resurfaces in the film *Life of Sin*, produced and directed by Efraín López Neris with a screenplay by Emilio Díaz Valcárcel in 1979 and more recently, in the novel *Nuestra señora de la noche* (2006) *Our Lady of the Night* by one of Puerto Rico's most read contemporary writers, Mayra Santos-Febres. The multitude of artistic projects surrounding a well-known madam suggests the complex potential of this figure within Puerto Rican culture. The protagonist, Isabel la Negra, is portrayed differently in each text, and her construction in each case obeys different literary imperatives and ideological concerns.

This article shows how the figure of Isabel la Negra in *Nuestra señora de la noche* (hereafter *Nuestra señora*) is used to symbolize a rebellion against both racism and the subjugation of women in Puerto Rico. This rebellion is developed through the protagonist's relationship to dominant, white male society, as is the contrasting

submission and madness of other female characters in the novel, thus converting the white male into the novel's narrative axis. This analysis is based on Aída Hurtado's theory as espoused in her book *The Color of Privilege: Three Blasphemies on Race and Feminism*. Since Hurtado's theory is founded on an analysis of US racial and gender discrimination, its application to Puerto Rican society is justified.

Racism in Puerto Rico cannot be simply equated to racism in the United States. As Mervyn C. Alleyne shows in his study of race and ethnicity in the Caribbean, racial discrimination has evolved somewhat differently in these two countries. According to Alleyne, despite the prevalence of what he terms the "Latin American myth of racial assimilation" (135) and the notion that "We are all Puerto Ricans" as the dominant Puerto Rican ideology (135), racism against people of color has existed in Puerto Rico since the first license was issued by the Spanish crown in 1519 to bring slaves directly from Africa to Puerto Rico (115).

The principal difference that Alleyne notes between racism in the two countries is that US racism is largely based on biological purity, while racism in Puerto Rico is socially constructed. Nonetheless, Alleyne indicates that "The Puerto Rican and North American racial systems are not independent of each other" (139) because there have been both political and corporate business influences by the United States in Puerto Rico that have affected racial perceptions there.

Alleyne concludes that, although in Puerto Rico there has historically been more social mixing of races than in other Caribbean nations, there essentially exists a racial homogeneity (white dominance) in the ruling classes that suggests a racial/classist bias in favor of whites (125). Alleyne states: "The racial hierarchy has been and still is intact. From the inception of Puerto Rican post-Columbian society, the color hierarchy inherited from Europe and reinforced by slavery was established" (131). In addition, Alleyne indicates that Puerto Rico has a "colour/class pyramid" in which "Blacks occupy the bottom of the socio-economic scale, but they are not alone and do not even dominate" (134-35). Finally, Alleyne indicates that there is a "social, aesthetic, and moral value hierarchy corresponding to skin colour (and other phenotypical features such

as hair texture, shape of the nose, and size of the lips)” (136).

Alleyne's sociological study is extensively cited, in order to illustrate the validity of the extension of Aída Hurtado's theory (initially made with reference to the United States) to an analysis of gender and racial discrimination in Puerto Rico. Since both countries operate on the basis of similar racial hierarchies, the use of Hurtado's study can be amply justified. The major differences (the US basis of racism on biological purity and the assignation of blacks exclusively to the bottom of the social hierarchy) do not vitiate the parallels that can be established between racism in both countries.

Santos-Febres constructs the figure of Isabel la Negra from a postmodern feminist perspective that analyzes the roles of gender, class, and race in the life of her protagonist. She defines Isabel la Negra and all of the female characters in her tale in relation to white men, the dominant historical group in both US and Puerto Rican society. Aída Hurtado's theory on race and feminism illuminates Santos-Febres's text. Hurtado states: “Each oppressed group in the United States ... is positioned in a particular distinct relationship to white men and each form of subordination is shaped by this relational position” (2), suggesting that white women and women of color have different relationships *vis à vis* white men (and this is true for Puerto Rico as well as the United States). White women, “as daughters, wives, or sisters” often benefit from social privilege and an economic cushion that is not available to women of color (Hurtado 5): “The avenues of advancement through marriage that are open to white women who conform to prescribed standards of middle-class femininity are not even a theoretical possibility for most women of Color” (11). Hurtado posits that white women are valued as spouses because they can produce racially pure offspring and this allows white women access to white men that women of color do not have. Consequently, “white women, as a group, are subordinated through seduction; women of Color, as a group, through rejection” (12). Although both women are subordinated through sexuality, each group exists in a different relationship to the white male, and thus feminism that grows out of the protest of this subordination must also be different in nature. White women are forced to accept a subservient role within the home, while black women, through their history of slavery, “were required to be as

masculine as men in the performance of work and were as harshly punished as men but they were also raped” (14-15). Thus, according to Hurtado, women of color are defined through a relationship of sexual violence by white men:

Chicano and Black women have, historically, been available to white men for the satisfaction and experience of their sexual violence. At the same time these women are not valued as white women are because of their inability to produce white offspring and their enormous value as laborers. Consequently, their womanhood, from the dominant group’s perspective has always been oversexualized, to the point of being portrayed as animalistic. (99)

These relational differences to white men lead white feminists to focus on “projecting private sphere issues into the public arena” (18) while women of color focus on public issues like affirmative action, racism, and prison reform that “cultivate awareness of the distinction between public policy and private choice” (18).

Hurtado’s ideas surface in Santos-Febres’s *Nuestra señora*, because the narrative is centered on a white man, Fernando Fornarís, and his relationship with both his white wife and his black lover (Isabel la Negra). Both Fornarís’s wife and Isabel la Negra are depicted as victims in the love triangle that evolves among the three parties. The victimization of the wife leads to her insanity, while the victimization of the black lover leads the protagonist, Isabel, to become a prostitute. However, in *Nuestra señora*, Isabel la Negra is not merely a prostitute, but a strong, self-made businesswoman who rises to wealth, power and fame in Ponce society. The figure of the prostitute evolves into a symbol of feminist and anti-racist resistance within the oppressive social forces against women and racial minorities in Puerto Rico during the first half of the twentieth century.

The first relevant aspect of Santos-Febres’s novel is its effort to incorporate the historically documented reality of black women in Puerto Rico during the first three decades of the twentieth century. According to Eileen Suárez Findlay in *Imposing Decency*:

For the wealthy white people who held economic and political

power in Ponce, the dramatic increase of poor, largely Afro-Puerto Rican people in “their” city was quite frightening... Perhaps, most disturbing of all, however, were the growing numbers of working-class women, many of them Afro-Puerto Rican, who crowded Ponce’s streets in the decades following emancipation. Their labor, mainly as laundresses, market women, and seamstresses, swelled the burgeoning informal economy. Gaining access to a wage of their own gave women in the city more sexual and economic autonomy than their rural sisters, especially when they pooled their earnings with other women.... Households of unrelated women also were not uncommon in the city by 1897 ... In a society where economic survival for the poor hung by a thread in the best of times and the sex for money quid pro quo was a fact of life for all women, the move into selling sex as one of a variety of income-earning strategies was probably not so unthinkable for laboring women.... After 1894, women suspected of being prostitutes were required to register on an official list, pay a “hygiene tax,” and submit to biweekly pelvic exams by designated hygiene doctors. (80-81)

Much of Findlay’s description of the work, leisure activities, hygiene laws, and general attitudes toward black women is replicated in *Nuestra señora*. Isabel’s first job after she serves in the house of doña Georgina is as a seamstress. After her affair with the soldier Isaac, she lives with her friend Leonor, and she attends one of the “bomba” dances (Santos-Febres 164) described by Findlay in her book. In the following passage from the novel, one of the interlocutor’s cousins is accused of being a prostitute and dragged to the hospital for one of the so-called hygiene examinations:

Andar sola de noche en aquellos días era motivo suficiente para que la policía acusara a cualquiera de “solicitud deshonesta.” Peor si eran “de profesión desconocida.” Se las llevaban al Hospital de Damas y allí las encerraban hasta por año y medio, sin celebrar juicio, ni levantar cargos ni permitir visitas familiares. “Reglamento de Higiene,” argumentaban, “dizque para curarnos las pústulas, pero mentira.” Se lo contaban esa noche las fulanas. Isabel las oía, “sí mija, y te meten a la fuerza como una tijera de

hierro que abre en dos por allá abajo para ver si estás enferma. Por más que tú grites, te lo hacen. A una prima mía que muchacha, no la ha tocado ni el aire, la agarraron una noche que a su patrona le dio por que se quedara remendando unas sábanas. Tuvo que ir mi tío y dos vecinos a reclamarla al cuartel y ni así la soltaron. (162)

Wandering alone at night in those times was motive enough for the police to accuse anyone of “dishonest solicitude.” And it was worse if they were of “unknown profession.” They would take them to the Ladies Hospital and lock them up there for up to a year and a half, without trial, or pressing charges, or family visits. “Hygiene regulation,” they said, “to heal our pustules, but it’s all lies.” That night, the women told the stories to each other and Isabel overheard. “Yes, honey, and they stick it to you by force, a thing like a steel scissors that splits you open down there to see if you are ill. It doesn’t matter how much you scream. A cousin of mine, *muchacha*, who hasn’t been touched by even the air, was grabbed one night she had to stay late because her *patrona* made her darn some sheets. My uncle and two neighbors had to go claim her at the police station and even then they didn’t let her go. (172)¹

These facts incorporated in the text, serve as the historical grounding for the situation of black women during the life of Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, who most likely (although historical dates are lacking) was born around the turn of the century. Furthermore, these passages help to establish Isabel’s identity as part of the colonized Puerto Rican society, where US laws and ideologies were constantly being imposed upon the country.

This backdrop launches us into the life of the character Isabel in Santos-Febres’s novel, a poor black girl who was abandoned by her mother and then adopted by a godmother or *Madrina*. For personal and economic reasons, Isabel’s godmother is forced to farm Isabel out as a domestic worker in the house of a rich white family. Eventually Isabel is kicked out of the house, when the mistress discovers that her husband, while drunk, attempted to make love to Isabel. Isabel then becomes a seamstress in Don Antón’s shop. She later resides with

her first love, a black soldier named Isaac who buys her a house but ultimately abandons her. Isabel's friend Leonor moves in with her and for awhile they do quite well. When Isabel needs more money, she accepts the offer of young Fernando Fornarís, to be paid to clean his office. However, she succumbs to his seduction and becomes pregnant. Isabel subsequently learns that Fernando is marrying a white society woman. She decides to abandon her baby upon birth, believing that it will interfere with her economic independence, and to dedicate herself to becoming a successful businesswoman. She opens up a brothel on the land that Fernando gave to her as a present out of guilt and names it Elizabeth's Dancing Place.

The story's plot illustrates Hurtado's notion that the black woman's relationship with the white man is a key determinant of her economic and social situation. Isabel exists in a relationship of rejection *vis à vis* Fornarís, and this rejection determines both her social status and her economic trajectory. Unfettered by the marital bond, and refusing to accept the limitations that would be imposed upon her by raising her child, Isabel is able to achieve economic and emotional independence from Fernando due to his rejection, by establishing her business. Isabel articulates this stance in many passages of the novel. For example, after she gives birth, the narrator states:

En esos mismos momentos Fernando Fornarís se está casando. Y ella acaba de escapársele a la muerte y de parirle un hijo. ¿Vivo? No lo quiere saber ... tan solo quiere enfocarse ... en la tierra que la espera para el próximo paso de su plan. ... Y vivir con la prueba de su trampa es demasiado para ella ahora, ahora que sabe lo que tiene que hacer. Convertirse por fin en lo que su matriz le dicta; en Isabel "La Negra" Luberza. (232-34)

At that exact moment, Fernando Fornarís is getting married. And she has just cheated death and given birth to a son. Is he alive? She doesn't want to know. All she wants to do is focus ... on the land that is waiting for the next step in her plan. ... And to live with the proof of his deceit is too much for her right now, now that she knows what she has to do. To become finally what her womb dictates, Isabel "La Negra" Luberza. (242-44)

Isabel's choice of prostitution is thus directly related to her abandonment by Fornarís. This background establishes Isabel's initial status as a victim of white male society. The rest of the novel develops Isabel's complex image as both a woman dedicated to religion and charity, and a powerful sexual madam who controls and devours men through her brothel.

According to Madan Sarup, postmodernism is characterized by "a rejection of narrative structure in favor of simultaneity and montage; an exploration of the paradoxical, ambiguous, and uncertain, open-ended nature of reality; and the rejection of the notion of an integrated personality in favor of an emphasis upon the Freudian 'split' subject" (Sarup 172). In other words, postmodern fiction subverts traditional dichotomies and dwells on the complex, contradictory nature of reality. This approach to the figure of Isabel Lubenza Oppenheimer in Santos-Febres's novel is prefigured by one of the epigraphs from Octavio Paz's "Piedra del sol" that appears on the first page of the novel: "vida y muerte/pactan en ti, señora de la noche, torre de claridad, reina del alba/virgen lunar, madre del agua madre,/cuerpo del mundo, casa de la muerte" (n.p.) 'life and death/reach an agreement in you, lady of the night, tower of clarity, queen of dawn/lunar virgen, mother of mother water,/body of the world, house of death.' Isabel la Negra, like Paz's "piedra del sol," is the "lady of the night" in whom life and death, the pure and corrupt, the positive and negative are joined. *Nuestra señora* not only derives its title from this citation, but also utilizes it as a pun, playing on the traditional religious connotation of "Nuestra señora," which refers to the Virgin Mary. This religious intertextuality not only points to the dual character of the protagonist, who is both a charitable, religious woman and an illegal prostitute, but is also developed throughout the novel in a series of religious references that are associated not only with Isabel la Negra, but also with María de la Candelaria Fresnet, the schizophrenic woman who takes care of Isabel's son, Nene.

In addition, Rosario Méndez Panedas points out the parallels established in the text between Isabel la Negra and the figure of Ochún, from the popular Santería religion that mixes African cults and Catholic saints. According to Méndez Panedas, Isabel shares a variety of characteristics with Ochún (also identified with La Virgen

de la Caridad del Cobre), including her association with water and the color yellow. Isabel la Negra's association with Ochún emphasizes both Isabel's seductive powers and her independence: "De acuerdo con el reciente estudio de Vivian Romeu sobre las deidades del panteón afrocubano, Ochún es una deidad que no posee límites en su juego seductor, es la diosa del amor... la diosa encarna también la independencia femenina" (n.p.) 'According to Vivian Romeu's recent study on the deities of the Afro-Cuban pantheon, Ochún is a deity that possesses no limits to her seductive game; she is the goddess of love ... the goddess also incarnates feminine independence.'

This postmodern portrait of Isabel, emphasizing both her positive and negative characteristics, is a first step toward subverting the traditional vision of the devouring evil prostitute, although at the same time prostitutes are still viewed this way by the novel's male characters. When Luis Arsenio, the graduating high school boy, attends Elizabeth's Dancing Place for the first time, he is smitten with Minerva, who, like Isabel, is a black prostitute. Luis Arsenio is described as being fearful of being swallowed up by Minerva, and this depiction fits with Erich Neumann's traditional view of the devouring female archetype: "Quería quitarse de encima el aroma de la mujer. Con el aroma desaparecería el recuerdo del tacto, el peso de sus piernas contra la espalda, la tibieza de su entrepierna tragándose entero" (29) 'He wanted to rid himself of the woman's aroma. And with the aroma would go the memory of the touch, the weight of her legs on his back, the warmth of her crotch swallowing him whole' (32). In general, descriptions of Minerva (who resembles the young Isabel), and Isabel Lubenza herself, emphasize their knowledge and power. Indeed, the name Minerva refers to the goddess of knowledge in Roman mythology. Similarly, Isabel is repeatedly portrayed as a powerful figure. When Luis Arsenio first meets her, the narrator states: "no había fórmula para conversar con señora tan ilegal, ni tan ponderosa, ni tan azul. Isabel Lubenza Oppenheimer, alias Isabel la Negra, alias la Madama, sostuvo aquella mirada que lo leía sin tregua (25) 'there were no specifications on how to chat with a woman so illegal, so powerful, so blue. Isabel Lubenza Oppenheimer, alias Isabel La Negra, alias the Madam, continued to stare at him, reading him through and through' (27). Moreover, Elizabeth's Dancing Place is portrayed as a

site that empowers the women who work there: “Miseria no, miseria no, la miseria de no poder levantar la cara. Nadie tendrá que bajar la cabeza en el lugar de Isabel” (262-63) ‘No misery, no misery, the misery of not being able to raise one’s chin. No one would have to lower their head in Isabel’s place’ (274).

The portrayal of Isabel oscillates between that of a hard-nosed businesswoman and that of a soft-hearted, charitable woman. Her social beneficence includes adopting Manolito, the son born to one of her prostitutes, donating money to the Church, and countless monetary donations to her town. Toward the end of the novel, Isabel is described as “La Escindida, la de mil nombres Isabel, La Negra, la Madama, la Patrona, Protectora y Tentación del Caminante. La que salva y la que pierde, eso es ella” (332) ‘the Divided One, Isabel of a Thousand Names, La Negra, the Patrona, Protector and Tempter of the Wanderer. She who saves and she who leads astray, that’s her’ (348). This characterization, focused on Isabel as a split subject, a constant duality, is postmodern in nature, and illustrates how the novel subverts traditional dichotomies employed to stereotype women.

The portrayal of Isabel la Negra in *Nuestra señora* inverts the traditional vision of the prostitute as either a passive victim of society or an evil corruptor of men. In *Nuestra señora*, the prostitute, as incarnated by Isabel la Negra is a symbol of resistance against patriarchal society. What Augusto Puleo notes with regard to Ferré’s short story also based on Isabel la Negra, is also applicable to *Nuestra señora*: “The irony is that the wife’s civil state, race and social class provide her with abundant opportunity as well as privilege that are not afforded to Isabel la Negra; however, the most dynamic and resourceful character is the mistress”(2). Similarly, Frances Aparicio indicates that “the ‘wisdom’ of the white European female tradition is rendered impotent, in contrast to the power and strategies used by the African woman, a differential form of power” (51). Both critics indirectly allude to the eventual descent of the white society women into madness, which occurs in both Ferré’s short story and Santos-Febres’s novel. The white women’s inability to lead productive lives despite their economic and social advantages highlights the strength and power accorded to the black prostitute in each text and raises the question of the negative effects of white female economic and

social dependency on potential feminist protest.

The role of insanity in the novel raises some interesting questions as well, particularly in regard to the fate of white women, who are as dependent upon white males as black women are for their survival. Cristina Rangel, Fernando Fornarís's wife, exemplifies the other side of the coin, the suffering of white females at the hand of their spouses. Santos-Febres shows through Cristina how white women share in their white husbands' privilege, but also are forced to adopt a subservient role. For example, the reader is told that "Cristina Rangel aprovechaba las Navidades para recordarles a todos que ella era la señora de la casa, señora en propiedad, sentenciadora de órdenes domésticas, pedidora de jamones, de cortes de lomo ahumado, ponches, mazapanes y avellanas que ofrecer a los invitados" (61) 'Doña Cristina Rangel took advantage of the Christmas holiday to remind everyone that she was the señora of the house, a true lady, the giver of domestic commands, who ordered the ham, the cuts of pork loin, the punches, the marzipan, and the hazelnuts to offer the guests' (65-66). Cristina, as Fernando's wife, is granted the privilege to have servants and give them orders. Nonetheless, Cristina Rangel is portrayed as an unhappy bourgeois woman, who turns to alcohol for solace faced with an unhappy marriage. Her husband's frequent disappearances from the house eventually lead Cristina to attempt suicide. She ends up in a hospital because of her mental illness. Santos-Febres blames Cristina's unfortunate existence on her husband's actions. For example, during the Christmas holiday, Fernando disappears from a family function, embarrassing Cristina as she searches for him to solve one of the guest's legal problems. Similarly, Fernando arrives inordinately late to the family's traditional New Year's Eve dinner. In both instances, Cristina is visibly upset and seeks alcohol to assuage her emotional pain.

Santos-Febres's portrayal of Cristina's insanity enters into dialogue with a growing body of critical studies on the subject of female insanity in literature, and whether or not female madness can be interpreted as subversive. The subversive value of insanity was first put forth by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their famous study about nineteenth-century British literature: *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). More recently, other studies have emerged that

challenge Gilbert and Gubar's assertion, such as Marta Caminero-Santangelo's *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (1998). Caminero-Santangelo poses the question "How does this strategy hold up in the face of the chaos of violence, abuse, battering, rape, political unrest and discrimination that affects real women's lives? The juxtaposition of the two questions is provocative, sounding a note of skepticism about the idea of madness as an antidote to violence, abuse, battering, and rape" (3). The context of *Nuestra señora* supports Caminero-Santangelo's argument. Madness is depicted as a desperate escape for middle-class white women, rather than a productive coping strategy. Cristina's descent into madness is counterposed to Isabel's more productive response of becoming a successful businesswoman to combat societal discrimination against women in general, and women of color, in particular. Hurtado's notion of rejection becomes a positive motivating force, while the white woman's dependence upon white male privilege incapacitates her for rebellion and leads to ultimate self-destruction.

The novel's portrayal of one of its secondary characters, María de la Candelaria Fresnet, the woman who raises Nene, is also centered on her relationship with white males. Montse, as she is called in the novel, is a black woman who both tends to a religious shrine and cares for Isabel and Fernando's child. She is portrayed as a schizophrenic who hears voices repeatedly and is sometimes out of touch with reality. She speaks to herself constantly in religious terms, referring to Fernando Fornarís as "El Amado" 'The Beloved One' and Nene as "El Niño" 'The Child.' "Amado" is used in the Bible to refer to Christ. These allusions elevate Fornarís, the white male, to a godlike figure, which emphasizes his privileged role in society. Furthermore, Montse herself has suffered the abuse of white males. She originally was hired as a nurse to don Ambrosio, who initiated a sexual relationship with her. Ambrosio made no provisions for Montse so that after his death, she and Nene relied on Ambrosio's sisters to administer their income, and were left to live in poverty. When Montse makes this situation known to Fernando, he remedies it by transferring the land titles into Montse's name.

Juan Pablo Rivera suggests Montse's postmodern nature in his discussion of her as a *Madrina* figure. Rivera points out that Montse is

illiterate, unable to read the letter Nene writes when he is transferred to the military base. According to Rivera, “el analfabetismo, así como la pobreza de la madrina, son los efectos más evidentes de un racismo que, si bien fundamentado en condiciones socio-históricas, no deja de tener vigencia hoy día” (n.p.) ‘the illiteracy, just as the poverty of the godmother, are the most evident effects of a racism that, although based on socio-historical conditions, does not cease to have validity today.’ However, Rivera also points out the contradiction between this illiteracy and Montse’s ability to negotiate: “Saber negociar es lo que cuenta. ... Junto a Isabel, ella [Montse] es la mejor negociante en la novela. ... Por esta razón también las madrinas en las novelas de Santos Febres son tan fuertes, particularmente en su relación con los hombres de negocios, los grandes falos en las obras” (n.p.) ‘Knowing how to negotiate is what matters. ... Together with Isabel, she [Montse] is the best negotiator in the novel. ... For this reason the godmothers in Santos Febres’s novels are also so strong, particularly in their relationship with businessmen, the great phalluses of the works.’ Montse’s duality, in contrast to Isabel’s, is not one of positive versus negative, or saint versus sinner. Instead, Montse oscillates between powerless illiterate and powerful negotiator. Montse’s rejection by white society does not result in total independence, as in the case of Isabel la Negra. Instead, Montse shares the white woman’s descent into madness because of dependency on and abuse by the white male but also manages some degree of economic independence through her final acquisition of the land titles.

Montse’s schizophrenia can be seen as a result of societal racism and abuse, and thus differs somewhat in nature from the madness associated with Cristina Rangel in the novel. In an interview titled “Soy del Caribe,” Santos-Febres responds in the following manner to the question “¿Por qué eligió a una mujer loca como madrina del Nene?”: “Tenía de alguna manera que nombrar el dolor de la marginación más absoluta. Entrar al espacio de la locura causada por décadas de servilismo, racismo, marginación, destitución. Es un espacio que he visto con mis propios ojos. Eso es lo que representa María de la Candelaria Fresnet, la Vieja” ‘Why did you choose a crazy woman as Nene’s godmother?’: ‘I had to name in some form the pain of the most absolute marginalization. Enter into the space

of madness caused by decades of servilism, racism, marginalization, destitution. It is a space I have seen with my own eyes. This is what María de la Candelaria Fresnet, the Old Woman, represents' (354). Montse's psychosis coincides with R.D. Laing's ideas on schizophrenia. Laing states that schizophrenia "is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation" (qtd. in Rigney 8). This is a rather apt description of María Candelaria de Fresnet's life.

Montse's schizophrenia is a reaction to her self-internalization of the racism against blacks by whites. Part of Montse has come to think of herself as dirty and inferior, and this has led to a deep psychic schism. In many passages of *Nuestra señora*, Montse expresses the idea that she is dirty. For example, on page five, the voices inside Montse's head state: "Yo, una mosca, peor, una mosca parada en un balde de mierda, la mierda misma, yo. Las voces de su cabeza no se aquietan" (5) 'me, a fly, or worse, a fly atop a bucket of shit, or the shit itself, me. The voices in her head are unalloyed' (7). Similarly, when don Fernando invites Montse to enter his car so he can take her and Nene on a shopping trip, Montse is afraid that her body will dirty the car seat: "La vieja se monta con cuidado en los asientos de cuero, no los vaya a ensuciar con algo, ¿con su piel?" (56) 'The old woman sits cautiously on the leather seats; don't stain them with anything: with her own skin?' (58). There are other examples, but these serve to illustrate the point. Montse is forced into a division between her real self and the self that racist society sees, and this results in an internal conflict that takes the form of schizophrenia in the novel.

In *Mad Intertextuality: Madness in Twentieth-Century Women's Writing*, Monika Kaup explores the madness in women's writing. In a chapter specifically dedicated to black women's writing, Kaup cites the ideas of William Dubois on what he terms "black double-consciousness":

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. (Dubois qtd. in Kaup 208)

Thus, according to Kaup, black women's writing includes "the instance of divided sight resulting from racism and a definition of blackness as dirt which parallels the definition of 'woman as lack,' and thus multiplies the oppression of race with the oppression of gender" (Kaup 209). Kaup's notion of "blackness as dirt" has particular relevance for Santos-Febres's novel, where Montse explicitly views herself as dirty and "shit itself" and suffers the negative consequences of the internalization of racism through her schizophrenia.

In summary, madness in *Nuestra señora* is not a subversive feminist protest, as is the entrepreneurship of Isabel la Negra and her conversion into a successful Madam in order to achieve financial independence and assert power on society. Instead, madness in the novel is the ineffective solution of the powerless, which includes both the socially and economically dependent upper class white woman, Cristina Rangel, as well as the poor, schizophrenic black woman, Montse. As Phyllis Chesler states:

Neither genuinely mad women, nor women who are hospitalized for conditioned female behavior, are powerful revolutionaries. Their insights and behavior are as debilitating (for social reasons) as they are profound. Such women act alone, according to rules that make no "sense" and are contrary to those of our culture. Their behavior is "mad" because it represents a socially powerless individual's attempt to unite body and feeling. (Chesler 115-16)

Hence, in *Nuestra señora*, the differing reactions and strategies of the upper-class white wife and the poor black lover/prostitute with regard to white male subordination result in a subversive portrait of the black prostitute/madam as a form of resistance and protest against the dominant forces of racism, classicism, and gender discrimination in patriarchal society. The reaction of women of color, as we have seen, is not always subversive (notably that of Montse), but can be in cases like that of Isabel, where racism is not internalized by the subject. Nonetheless, Santos-Febres does not see the historical Isabel Luberza as a feminist figure, because, as she notes in an interview: "Yo no creo que Isabel Luberza fuera feminista. Al fin y al cabo, traficaba con otras mujeres" (353) 'I don't think that Isabel Luberza was a feminist. When all is said and

done, she trafficked in other women.’ Moreover, in her collection of essays, *Sobre piel y papel* (2005) published shortly before *Nuestra señora*, Santos-Febres indicates that the sexualizing of the figure of the black woman, and the inherent racism it implies, are ultimately destructive forces that led to the death of the historical Isabel la Negra:

La sexualización de las mujeres negras responde en gran parte a la fabricación de esta “inferioridad” social. ... Sin embargo, el hecho de que sean “inferiores” no es el único elemento funcionando en el sistema de demandas y ofertas sexuales. Para que el negocio funcione, la “presa” tiene que servir de gancho de seducción. ... muchas jóvenes esclavas, después de la abolición, continuaron practicando la profesión que le [sic] enseñaron sus amos ... Se aprendieron de memoria el rol de la seductora (la Mulata) y lo emplearon para conseguir lo que necesitaban para sobrevivir y ... para avanzar socialmente. Xica Da Silva, Isabel la Negra ... Y todas terminaron asesinadas, abandonadas, destruidas por las invisibles manos de la dominación. (120-21)

The sexualizing of black women responds to a large degree to the fabrication of this social “inferiority” ... However, the fact that they are “inferior” is not the only element functioning in this system of sexual supply and demand. In order for the business to function, the “prey” must serve as a hook for seduction. ... many young slaves, after abolition, continued practicing the profession that their masters taught them.... They memorized the role of seductress (The Mulatta) and employed it to obtain what they needed to survive ... and to advance socially. Xica Da Silva, Isabel la Negra ...and all of them wound up murdered, abandoned, destroyed by the invisible hands of domination.

Although Isabel’s death ultimately points toward her failure to triumph over patriarchal society, it cannot be denied that Santos-Febres constructs the figure of the black madam/prostitute as combative of this society’s racism, classicism, and sexism, a rebellion initially inspired by the protagonist’s rejection by white male society. Hence, the white male, Fernando Fornaris, functions as the narrative

axis upon which *Nuestra señora* turns and upon which all of the female characters are constructed.

Notes

1 All translations of *Nuestra señora de la noche*, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the English translation by Ernesto Mestre-Reed. All other translations are mine.

Works Cited

- Alleyne, Mervyn C. *The Construction and Representation of Race and Ethnicity in the Caribbean and the World*. Barbados: U of the West Indies P, 2002. Print.
- Aparicio, Frances R. *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music and Puerto Rican Cultures*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1998. Print.
- Caminero-Santangelo, Marta. *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity is Not Subversive*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998. Print.
- Chesler, Phyllis. *Women and Madness*. New York: Palgrave, 2005. Print.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1980. Print.
- Ferré, Rosario. "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres." *Papeles de Pandora*. México: Mortiz, 1976. Print.
- Hurtado, Aída. *The Color of Privilege: Three Blasphemies on Race and Feminism*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996. Print.
- Kaup, Monika. *Mad Intertextuality: Madness in Twentieth-Century Women's Writing*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher, 1993. Print.
- López Neris, Efraín, dir. *Life of Sin*. Twenty-First Century Productions, 1979. Film.
- Méndez Panedas, Rosario. "El sujeto caribeño o la seducción de la alteridad en *Nuestra señora de la noche* de Mayra Santos Febres." *Espéculo* 43 (November 2009). Print.
- Neumann, Erich. *The Great Mother*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991. Print.
- Puleo, Augusto. "The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class in a Short Story of Rosario Ferré." *Studies in Short Fiction*. 32.2 (1995): 227-36. Print.

- Ramos Otero, Manuel. "La última plena que bailó Luberza." *El cuento hispanoamericano*, vol. III. Ed. Fernando Burgos. Madrid: Castalia, 1997. 176-95. Print.
- Rigney, Barbara Hill. *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel: Studies in Bronte, Woolf, Lessing, and Atwood*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1978. Print.
- Rivera, Juan Pablo. "Lenguas madrinas. Nuestra señora de la noche y el bilingüismo de Sirena Selena." *Ciberletras* 16 (Jan. 2007), n.p. Web. 15 Sept. 2010.
- Santos-Febres, Mayra. *Nuestra señora de la noche*. New York: Rayo, 2008. Print.
- . *Our Lady of the Night*. Trans. Ernesto Mestre-Reed. New York: Harper, 2006. Print.
- . *Sobre piel y papel*. San Juan: Callejón, 2005. Print.
- . "Soy del Caribe" (interview) in *Nuestra señora de la noche*. New York: Rayo, 2008. 351-56. Print.
- Sarup, Madan. *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1993. Print.
- Suárez-Findlay, Eileen J. *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870-1920*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. Print.