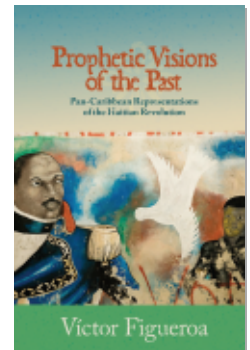




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Between Mackandal and Tembandumba

Luis Palés Matos's Haitian Poems

Black Puerto Ricans

In 1980, the Puerto Rican writer José Luis González caused commotion in Puerto Rico's intellectual circles when he published his now classic, albeit still controversial, essay "El país de cuatro pisos" ["Puerto Rico: the Four-Storeyed Country"].¹ The essay, with others that composed the volume, attempted to define and clarify the issue of the island's national identity by paying attention to an often overlooked, if not repressed aspect of it: race. González's position, resulting from his examination of the role of slaves in the island during the colonial period, was in a nutshell:

It is because of this that I believe, as I have said on various occasions to the embarrassment and irritation of some, that the first Puerto Ricans were in fact *black* Puerto Ricans. I am not claiming, needless to say, that these first Puerto Ricans had any idea of a "national homeland," for in fact *no one* at that time in Puerto Rico entertained, or could have entertained, such an idea. What I *am* claiming is that it was the blacks, the people bound most closely to the territory which they inhabited (they were after all slaves), who had the greatest difficulty in imagining any other place to live. (*Puerto Rico*, 10)

A corollary of González's argument is that Puerto Rican culture, as expressed in its popular manifestations from the ground up (as opposed to its portrayal by Puerto Rican elites throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries), is fundamentally Afro-Caribbean in character. González is not trying to deny the multiplicity of elements from diverse cultures that have come together to give shape to what we might identify as Puerto Rican culture (although he *is* trying to give a privileged place to Puerto Rico's African legacy within that multiplicity). However, he does challenge a generalized view of Puerto Rico in which its culture is fundamentally Hispanic (that is, derived from Spain) and emblemized in the idealized portrayal of the old plantations with paternal *hacendados* [land-owners] taking care of an idyllic world built on the labor of mainly white *jibaros* [peasants]. That view can be traced from nineteenth-century foundational works such as Manuel Alonso's *El gíbaro* (1849), through classics like Manuel Zeno Gandía's *La charca* (1894), up to the anticolonial but nostalgic works of René Marqués, such as *La carreta* (1951) and *La víspera del hombre* (1959).² It would not be until later in the twentieth century that such restricted (and often programmatically restrictive) views of Puerto Rican identity would be challenged by younger generations of writers, who often had to deal with the fierce resistance of writers from the older generation, such as Marqués himself (see Gelpí, *Literatura*).

González's arguments were challenged not only by the predictable reactionary perspective that indeed would attempt to deny Puerto Rico's deep links to the broader Afro-Caribbean experience but also by more sympathetic readers who nonetheless questioned González's methodology, or his seemingly harsh criticism of traditionally venerated figures such as nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos.³ What seems undeniable is that González tapped into a problem that in fact has provoked deep anxiety among Puerto Rican intellectuals ever since the very idea of a Puerto Rican "national identity" began to be discussed: Puerto Rico's African roots (the issue of racial mixing plays an important role, for example, in Alejandro Tapia y Rivera's foundational play, *La cuarterona* [1867], even though Tapia y Rivera has its plot take place in Cuba). Possibly the best known expression of the national intelligentsia's dismissal of that African dimension is Antonio Pedreira's *Insularismo*, the classic early-twentieth-century essay that dismisses all influences on Puerto Rico's culture other than the Hispanic one.⁴ A lesser known example that gives an idea of how pervasive Pedreira's views were among Puerto Rico's intellectuals is Tomás Blanco, who in fact did not see eye to

eye with Pedreira on some issues, but who felt perfectly comfortable writing in the misleadingly titled *El prejuicio racial en Puerto Rico* [*Racial Prejudice in Puerto Rico*]: “The people of Puerto Rico live within the general norms of Western Culture. Although the mixture of blacks and whites is considerable, the African element has only had a very light influence on Puerto Rico’s cultural traits. The prejudices one can find in the island are those shared by the white race in general . . . Racial prejudice, as it is understood in the United States, does not exist” (138; my translation). Arguing that there are no lynchings or actual segregation laws as in the American South (Blanco published his book in 1942), Blanco proceeds to dismiss the impact of black culture in Puerto Rico, recurring to a myth of racial democracy that resembles in some ways Gilberto Freyre’s similar argument for Brazil.

It is not my intention here to argue Blanco’s and Pedreira’s discredited views, but rather to point out that those views were in fact pervasive throughout the twentieth century (and arguably still exert their influence on the twenty-first), and that it is against those views that González writes *El país de cuatro pisos*.⁵ In the second essay of his volume, titled “Literature and National Identity in Puerto Rico,” González mentions several writers who, in his view, constitute exceptions in at least trying to acknowledge the importance of the Afro-Caribbean element in Puerto Rican culture.

Among those writers, not surprisingly, the poet Luis Palés Matos occupies a privileged place. Regarding him, González indicates:

The path followed by this great poet from “Pueblo negro” to “Mulata Antilla,” or rather, the progressive refinement, without precedent in Puerto Rican literature, of a conception of the national genetics, is a path of unique and definitive discovery into the Afro-Antillean roots of our identity as a people. The unprecedented virulence of the attacks on Palés Matos’s theme of *negrismo* (negritude) voiced by many of the then outstanding representatives of *criollismo* and literary “avant-gardism”—J. I. de Diego Padró, José Antonio Dávila, Graciany Miranda Archilla, and others—is yet one further example of how the Puerto Rican cultural elite was increasingly reluctant to face the problem of national identity from an unprejudiced and realistic perspective. (*Puerto Rico*, 62)

If I have begun this chapter with González’s placing of Palés Matos in the context of Puerto Rico’s conflictive relation to its own Afro-Caribbean legacy, it is because González’s is indeed a lucid and classic presentation of the social, political and cultural milieu from which Palés Matos arose as an

important poet. I agree with González's general assessment of the context in which Palés Matos wrote and with his opinion that Palés Matos's achievement has no real precedent in Puerto Rican letters, so that its importance cannot be overstated. However, as I will elaborate below, it is also clear that Palés Matos did not write from an unbiased acceptance of Puerto Rico's African heritage. As I will demonstrate, what marks Palés Matos's poetry is his own ambiguity towards his material, which causes him to embrace yet at the same time distance himself from the Afro-Caribbean realities that his poetry so vividly portrays. Palés Matos's poetry stands in paradoxical, often agonistic relation to the social and cultural crucible from which it arises, as it both challenges and reflects that crucible. As we will examine, nowhere do we see Palés Matos's ambivalence more clearly than in his approach to the Haitian Revolution, which plays a central role in several of his poems. That the events in Haiti play such an important role at all in the writings of a Puerto Rican writer immediately places him apart from the other writers of his generation—only in the last decades of the twentieth century (since the 1980s) did the non-Hispanic Caribbean begin to play an important role in Puerto Rican literature, in the works of writers like Ana Lydia Vega, Mayra Montero, and Mayra Santos Febres. And yet Palés Matos's pioneering work remains problematic and ultimately ambivalent.

Luis Palés Matos's classic book, *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* (1937; rev. ed. 1950), is rightly considered one of the classic foundational texts of Afro-Caribbean poetry in Spanish.⁶ That poetic current, often called "negrismo" in Spanish, has encountered both defenders and detractors throughout the years. Palés Matos, in particular, has been the site of numerous conflictive readings. His poems generated a great deal of resistance in the 1920s and 1930s among a Puerto Rican intellectual elite that rejected them as "authentic" Puerto Rican poetry, yet also celebrated their aesthetic achievement (see, for example, Diego Padró). But there have also been criticisms from more progressive perspectives that in fact object to Palés Matos's often stereotypical, somewhat flat representation of blacks in the Caribbean, which seemingly reduces them to exotic, dancing figures without much depth or historical density (see Johnson, *Devil*; and Zenón Cruz, *Narciso*). A figure often invoked to provide contrast with Palés Matos is the Cuban Nicolás Guillén, who very early became the emblematic figure of a politically committed Afro-Caribbean poetry that takes into account the sociohistorical struggles of Cuba's black populations. The fact that Palés Matos was a white poet whereas Guillén was a man of color has certainly influenced those readings (see González Pérez, "Ballad of Two Poets"). To these assessments we

must add Palés Matos's persistent sexualization of the black world, which the novelist Mayra Santos Febres has highlighted (*Sobre piel*, 153): in Palés Matos's poetry, islands are often women of color who dance and entice both tourists and colonialists, and are portrayed in such a way that often both oppressors and defenders relate to them as feminine objects of desire that must be either possessed or defended. On the other side of the spectrum we find celebratory readings of Palés Matos, both as a writer committed to the defense of Puerto Rico's national identity from an Afro-Caribbean perspective (Díaz-Quinones, *El almuerzo*), and as ludic ironist that celebrates Puerto Rico's heterogeneous, postmodern *avant la lettre* mixture of cultures and peoples, which cannot be reduced to any one single, coherent narrative of the nation (Ríos Avila, *La raza*).⁷

Not surprisingly, there is much truth in *all* of the conflictive readings of Palés Matos described above, and they all capture important aspects of Palés Matos's personality as a writer and cultural signifier. However, those multiple conflictive sides cannot be simply smoothed out and made to fit together in a fully coherent, albeit ironic poetic subject. Palés Matos remains a composite, multifarious figure whose different sides always remain in conflict with each other, while insisting on not letting go of each other. Although it is certainly true that Palés Matos fully opened the doors of Puerto Rican literature to an Afro-Caribbean realm that many strove to keep out, the poet often comes across as stubbornly trying to keep his distance from the very realm that his poems so masterfully articulate. It is also true that, in contrast with Guillén's more populist poetry, Palés Matos's is more baroque in its inflections, insisting on rhythms and sonorities whose exoticizing effect may result "distracting" for readers looking for more programmatic political positions in his poems.⁸ Palés Matos's well-known irony mocks not only the traditional centers and representatives of colonial power but also those whom many would regard as the victims of those colonial practices. All the while, the poetic voice often remains subtly aloof from all sides of the conflict.⁹

However, of all the attacks against Palés Matos's poetry, there is one that can be dismissed as inaccurate with relative ease: the notion that Palés Matos only deals with an abstract, ahistorical construction of blackness. Nicolás Guillén himself declared in an interview: "In Palés Matos, what emerges is a black, how can I put it, a superficial black, a black without any human problems at all . . . his position toward life was really limited, and he was satisfied with the rhythmic thing, which, by the way, is really beautiful, there is no doubt, but he did not go any deeper than that" (Prescott, "Conversation," 353).¹⁰ As a matter of fact, even if one disagrees with Palés

Matos's sometimes clearly Eurocentric perspective, Caribbean history does play a fundamental role in his poetry, particularly as he examines the effects of the protracted colonialism that Puerto Rico and many of its neighboring islands still endured when Palés Matos was writing. It is true that many of his poems are not explicitly *about* history, but most of them are full of symbolic images, figures, and locations that clearly point toward that mostly conflictive history: sugar mills, pirates and smugglers, impoverished black towns, Afro-Caribbean religious ceremonies, and the often ominous, sometimes slightly ridiculous presence of European and North American interests. In this context, it is notable but not surprising that there is one foundational historical event that shows up both directly and indirectly in several of the poems of *Tuntún de pasa y grifería*: the Haitian Revolution.

Revolt in the Midst of Dancing

Before examining Palés Matos's main "Haitian" works, "Elegía del duque de la Mermelada" and "Lagarto verde," we must take a look at "Canción festiva para ser llorada" ["Festive Song to Be Wept"], in which Haiti for the first time appears as an important component of one of his poems. "Canción festiva" is one Palés Matos's great works, one in which his creolized ironic vision of the Caribbean comes to full fruition, as expressed in its recurring refrain—"Cuba—ñañigo y bachata / Haití—vodú y calabaza / Puerto Rico—burundanga" (543) ["Cuba—ñañigos and celebration / Haiti—Vodou and calabash / Puerto Rico—a hodgepodge" (my translation)]. The poem locates Puerto Rico and Cuba in the broader multilingual Caribbean with Haiti, as opposed to the traditional nineteenth-century affiliation of Puerto Rico with only the other Spanish speaking islands, Cuba and Dominican Republic. In case any doubt remains, the rest of the poem makes sure to include other Francophone and Anglophone islands such as Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Kitts, and Jamaica.

As is often the case with Palés Matos, the very words that he uses to emblemize the islands are ambiguous in their irony: is the poet celebrating the elements that characterize the islands, or is he mocking them? Is "burundanga" (a local term referring to a heterogeneous, disorderly mix) a bad or a good thing? Characteristically, the reader cannot come to a final answer, because Palés Matos keeps his ironic distance in the midst of his celebration: his humor cuts both ways. The poem puts to rest (as do most of his poems, in any case) the myth of a Palés Matos oblivious to the

historical and political realities of the Caribbean. With biting satire, the poem refers to:

Antillean island, thick steam
of curdled sugar cane juice.
Constant work of the sugar-mill.
Turkish bath of sugar cane molasses.
Aristocracy dressed in cotton,
whose life slides by
among custard phrases
and succulent metaphors.
Stylized coasts
tended to by sickly palm trees.
Soft and dripping language—
mamey, cacao, guanábana—
Babbitt the tourist traps you
as a black boy and a coconut tree;
Sensual Tartarin dreams about you
in your parrot and your mulatto woman . . .

(Palés Matos, “Canción festiva,” 547; my translation)

A whole history of colonial domination is contained in these lines’ images: the syrupy boiling cane juice and the sugar production machines; the presence of Europe (Tartarin) and the United States (Babbitt) as both plantation capital and tourism; and the local “aristocracy” that recalls V. S. Naipaul’s notion of “mimic men,” colonial subjects whom the poet mocks for their presumed inability to think creatively, and condemns for their blind imitation of the forms imposed on them by the colonial system. All of those elements are presented through the very “succulent metaphors” that the poem self-referentially evokes. In the midst of that Caribbean that the poet clinically dissects, playfully chides, and both embraces and rejects with the same poetic gesture, Haiti with its revolution will play a central role.

The first mention of Haiti is openly satirical; the poetic voice states, directly addressing the Francophone islands in an apostrophe: “In French style I slide / over your mulatto flesh / since, for lack of bread, your cake / is dark Antillean glory. / I will bring you from Haiti / a consul from the aristocracy: / the Count of Ring-in-Ear, / the Duke of Marmalade” (543; my translation). In my discussion of the book’s two main “Haitian poems” in the next section, I will return to the topic of these “mimic men,” Haiti’s post-

revolutionary aristocracy (mainly during the kingship of Henri Christophe), and of Palés Matos's problematic attitude toward them. Here the presence of the Count and the Duke is mainly the object of the poet's caricature, with the "ring in the ear" offering a primitivist image that counteracts the count's attempt to imitate the European aristocracy. After that mocking allusion to Haiti's nobility under Christophe, "Canción festiva" shifts its focus toward the actual slave rebellion:

Mackandal beats his drum
 in the wrathful Haitian night.
 Ivory teeth gleam
 in the darkness.
 Hostile strange forms
 creep in between the trees,
 and Haiti, fierce and enigmatic,
 boils like a threat.
 It is Vodou. The tremendous
 hour of the zombie and the frog.
 Over the sugar-cane fields
 the spirits are at work.
 Ogun Badagri, in the shadows,
 sharpens his black dagger.
 —Tomorrow the little master ("el amito")
 will wear the best tie—
 Dessalines shouts: Blood!
 L'Ouverture roars: Revenge!
 while remote, hidden
 in the deep forest,
 Mackandal beats his drum
 in the wrathful Haitian night.

(Palés Matos, "Canción festiva," 546–47; my translation)

As a poet whose roots drink from the symbolist wells of Spanish American *modernismo*, Palés Matos gives prominence to images and metaphors: the white teeth gleaming in the dark of night (which hides the dark faces), the sound of drums, sinuous shadows advancing from between the trees, and zombies and Vodou spirits.¹¹ These are the kinds of details that have earned Palés Matos the reputation of focusing almost exclusively on the picturesque or exotic elements of Afro-Caribbean culture. However, Palés Matos places

those details within an implicit narrative that does not shy away from foregrounding the seriousness of the events: with dark humor the poet tells us that tomorrow the master will have “the best of ties”: a cut throat. Some of the main protagonists of the events (Mackandal, L'Overture, Dessalines) are explicitly identified, while the undeniable role of Vodou in framing the events in Haiti is given prominence. By condensing the events of the revolution in a few images that brood with strangeness, a sense of dread and the imminence of violent bloodshed, Palés Matos is able to convey the collapse of a system that took itself not only as fair but also as part of the natural order of things. In that context, it is significant that the emotions that dominate in the lines quoted above (fear, dread, anxiety) are emotions the white elite (“el amito”) would have felt, both in Haiti and in the surrounding islands (see Geggus, *The Impact*; and Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*). They are not primordially the emotions of the slaves, who were fighting for their freedom and perfectly at ease with their own Vodou gods and rituals. One might find fault with Palés Matos’s approach, and the question is one that comes up repeatedly as one reads his “Haitian poems:” they are *about* the revolution, but from *whose* perspective are they written? The answer is not always clear. However, in a poem like “Canción festiva” the ambiguous choice of focalization in fact allows for a compelling portrayal of the destruction of an order of things, precisely because the poem highlights the emotions of those who have most cynically benefited from it and have the most to lose from its demise.

Taken in the context of the whole poem, the Haitian section of “Canción festiva para ser llorada” stands out as a significant instance of successful Antillean revolt—a revolt that in fact contrasts with Palés Matos’s dominant pessimism and skepticism regarding the political future of the islands. The poem begins, like others of Palés Matos, in a playful mood: the diverse Caribbean islands are convoked for a dance, each island’s description filled with metaphorical images. However, the allusions to sugar and its derivatives, like rum, inevitably place the poem—and the archipelago—in the context of the imperial occupations that have dominated its history. We also find a reference to the region’s hurricanes, and two mentions of Babbitt, Sinclair Lewis’s emblematic figure of the North American ethos of conformity and capitalist self-aggrandizement without much regard for ethics. After the Haiti segment, the poem ends with the first section I quoted, with the islands steeped in sugar cane molasses and in the grasp of both Babbitt and Tartarin (hero of Alphonse Daudet’s homonymous novel, who leaves his sedentary French village in order to look for “adventures”

in a colonial, Orientalist Algiers), who are assisted by the local “aristocracia de dril” [“cotton-clad aristocracy”]. Thus, as is in fact often the case in Palés Matos, the festivities and the dance of “Canción festiva para ser llorada” hardly hide an undertow of political despair paired with accumulating rebelliousness.

In that regard, it is useful to remember that the Puerto Rico in which Palés Matos originally wrote the poem in 1929 (it was published in several magazines before its inclusion in *Tuntún* in 1937) shared with much of the rest of the Caribbean very similar conditions of poverty and dispossession that are linked to traditional colonial domination. The Puerto Rico of 1950, when the book’s second edition appeared, was in rapid transformation, but it was still more similar than not to the rest of the region. The second half of the twentieth century would increase the political and economic distance between the islands as they moved toward different political formulas (from Puerto Rico’s “Commonwealth,” to the French Caribbean’s “overseas department” status, to Cuba’s socialism). Those differences better hid persistent neocolonial practices and continued dependence on European and North American metropolitan centers.

From that perspective, the Haiti section of the poem shines as an example of Caribbean revolt, and successful revolt at that. That dimension of the poem cannot be denied, even though, as we have seen, the poet is not quite able, or willing, to look at the Haitian Revolution *from* the perspective of the triumph it constituted against some of the evils that the poem itself presents. The rebellious slaves are still focalized from a perspective that mixes Caribbean admiration with white dread. And it is precisely that mixed perspective that leads us to the two main poems that deal with the Haitian Revolution’s aftermath, specifically the reign of Henri Christophe.

A Duke and a Count

“Elegía del duque de la Mermelada” [“Elegy for the Duke of Marmalade”] is an ironically ponderous poem whose long lines and solemn rhythm enact the pretentiousness that its content parodies: the duke is a member of Henri Christophe’s court. Given the excess that characterized both Christophe and his kingdom, it is not surprising that they have fascinated so many Caribbean writers, including Aimé Césaire, Alejo Carpentier, and Derek Walcott, who have approached that period from widely divergent perspectives. On the one hand, Christophe has been judged as a megalomaniacal aberration, and his

kingdom as a betrayal of everything that the revolution stood for, particularly the liberation of the slaves who were, for all practical purposes, re-enslaved under Christophe's brutal regime. On the other hand, Christophe's kingdom has also been regarded as the admittedly excessive and almost picturesque form taken by several tendencies and forces that had been at work since the beginning of the revolution: first and foremost, the tendency of Haitian leaders to seize absolute power and crush dissent (a tendency, some might argue, that starts with Louverture); the uneasy compromise between the desire to affirm Haiti's Afro-Caribbean specificity and the need to court Europe's (and the United States') stamp of approval (and investment capital); and the endemic disconnect between Haitian elites and the masses.

In Palés Matos's poetry, the duke appears as the ultimate Naipaulian "mimic man" who betrays his "African" roots for the pseudo-sophisticated mannerisms and paraphernalia of the European aristocracy:

Oh my fine, my sugar-coated Duke of Marmalade!
Where have you left your caimans in the distant village of the Pongo,
and the blue and round shade of your African baobabs,
and your fifteen wives smelling of jungle and mud?

You will no longer eat your succulent roasted child,
the family monkey will no longer kill your lice during the afternoon nap,
your sweet eye will no longer gaze at the effeminate giraffe
across the flat and hot silence of the savannas.

They are over—your nights by the lit bonfires,
and the drowsy and persistent dripping of the drums,
the drumming in which you would sink as in a warm mud,
until you reached the distant shores of your great great-grandfather.

Now, wearing your fanciful French dress-coat,
you walk around receiving sugared greetings like a regular courtier,
in spite of the fact that your feet scream at you from your ducal boots:
"Babilongo, climb up the cornices of the palace."

How elegant my Duke looks with Madame de Cafolé,
all velvety and clean in the blue music of the violins,
as he contains his hands, which scream at him from his ducal gloves:
"Babilongo, throw her down on the rose-colored divan!"

From the distant shores of your great great-grandfather,
 across the flat and hot silence of the savannas,
 why are your caimans crying in the distant village of the Pongo?,
 oh my fine, my sugar-coated Duke of Marmalade!?

(Palés Matos, "Elegía," 559; my translation)

The poem leaves no doubt as to why the caimans in the Duke's ancestral Africa are crying in the last stanza: by adopting the ways of the French aristocracy, the Duke has betrayed his identity, an identity grounded in an ancient landscape still inhabited by figures like his guiding ancestors (the great great-grandfather), tribal customs (his fifteen wives), and quasi-totemic animals. That dimension of the poem (its denunciation of assimilation to colonial models) should not be undervalued, and it is a reading that has been emphasized by many critics (such as López Baralt, in Palés Matos, *La poesía*, 48r; Arce, qtd. in López Baralt, *El barco*, 165; and González Pérez, "Ballad of Two Poets," 290). In that regard, Palés Matos is not far from other Caribbean writers who have attempted to emphasize the archipelago's connections to Africa, and who have criticized attempts to sever or hide those connections; Césaire in his *Cahier* and Kamau Brathwaite in his *Arrivants* trilogy are notable examples.

However, it is hard for the critical reader to ignore what several of Palés Matos's critics have markedly pointed out: his "defense" of the "ancestral" Africa that the duke seems to be forgetting is presented in such blatantly stereotypical, Eurocentric terms, that the effect is at best ambiguous, at worst a gallery of racist images. As examples of the "African customs" that the duke abandons, the reader finds cannibalism ("You will no longer eat your succulent roasted child"); sexual unbridling ("as he contains his hands, which scream at him from his ducal gloves: Babilongo, throw her down on the rose-colored divan!"); sheer animalistic behavior ("in spite of the fact that your feet scream at you from your ducal boots: Babilongo, climb up the cornices of the palace"); laziness and exoticism ("the family monkey will no longer kill your lice during the afternoon nap, your sweet eye will no longer gaze at the effeminate giraffe across the flat and hot silence of the savannas"). One might try to justify such images by appealing to Palés Matos's well-known irony, and by emphasizing the historical moment in which he was writing, when what we call today "Eurocentrism" was simply taken for granted not only in Europe but around the globe. Aníbal González Pérez suggests that, "as Juan Antonio Corretjer and Arcadio Díaz Quiñones have pointed out, rather than blaming Palés Matos for being a (white) man of his time and place, the

positive elements of his Afro-Antillean poems should be stressed” (“Ballad of Two Poets,” 290). In that context, that Palés Matos had less than enlightened ideas about Africa is hardly surprising, and more weight would fall on the fact that he celebrates—albeit with irony—Afro-Caribbean culture at all, while also criticizing European imperialism. Taken to the extreme, that line of argumentation could even plausibly propose that Palés Matos uses those stereotypes *precisely* because they are stereotypes, as still another attack on European pretensions of superiority; after all, the luxury and customs of the European aristocracy are also mocked in the poem.

Those arguments have some value, and yet I must strongly agree with the critic Gerald Guinness when he argues, referring specifically to those who accuse Palés Matos of racism: “These are strong statements and not necessarily correct ones. It is strange, nonetheless, how little *white* defenders of Palés Matos feel they have to take such expressions of injured black pride into account when they write about Palés Matos’s poetry” (*Here and Elsewhere*, 15). Indeed, while stating *only* that Palés Matos was racist may be overly simplistic or anachronistic, to simply dismiss that aspect of his work at the same time that he is celebrated as a champion of Puerto Rico’s Afro-Caribbean identity is at best extremely problematic. It seems more adequate to acknowledge and carefully map the discomfort that Palés Matos’s poetry provokes (or should provoke) in alert readers, particularly when the elements of that discomfort so clearly reflect the coloniality of power that still dominates, and the colonial difference that still alienates, the very Caribbean that Palés Matos was trying to dissect in his poems.

The fact of the matter is that, by the time Palés Matos publishes the second edition of *Tuntún* (1950), and by the time the last collection of his poems is prepared by Federico de Onís and revised by the poet himself (1957)—two collections that include his Haitian poems from the thirties—we may reasonably assume Palés Matos’s familiarity with at least *some* developments in the process of wider self-awareness, pride, and affirmation in the African diaspora in the Americas. I am referring to manifestations such as Nicolás Guillén’s poetry in Cuba, the Harlem Renaissance poets in the United States, and the *Négritude* movement in the Francophone Caribbean (the *Cabier* was translated into Spanish by Lydia Cabrera in 1943 [included in Cabrera]). We cannot tell how many of these developments Palés Matos was aware of, although he clearly knew the work of other literary figures from the “*poesía negrista*” movement, such as the Colombian poet Jorge Artel. In a 1937 talk on Palés Matos’s poetry, Tomás Blanco (who was Palés Matos’s personal

friend) indicates that Palés Matos was acquainted with the work of Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes, that is to say, two of the most progressive black poets of the period (*Sobre Palés Matos*, 43); Palés Matos himself mentions these two poets, as well as others like Emilio Ballagas, in a 1950 essay on Artel (*Obras*, 259). We know from the “glossary” that he appended to the second edition of *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* that he knew at least Alejo Carpentier’s first novel, *Ecué-Yamba-O* (1933), which in spite of its avant-garde exoticism focuses on the denunciation of the living conditions of poor black populations of Cuba in the early twentieth century.

I am not claiming that Palés Matos could have had a postmodern, multiculturally inflected, or “politically correct” view of Puerto Rican (or Caribbean) identity in the 1930s, 1940s, or 1950s; however, I am suggesting that we cannot explain away his problematic representation of black characters as merely a sign of his times, while attributing his groundbreaking celebration of Afro-Caribbean culture exclusively to his personal genius. It seems more reasonable to suppose that Palés Matos clearly had an ambiguous, sometimes even contradictory relation to the material with which his poems deal. This ambiguity was certainly not exclusive to him. Leaving aside the blatantly racist critics who would not acknowledge the importance of African culture in Puerto Rico, Palés Matos seems to have been part of a group of progressive intellectuals who were willing to acknowledge the importance of that African dimension, but who at the same time felt threatened by the need to include those hitherto marginalized perspectives. An example of one such intellectual is Tomás Blanco, a friend and early enthusiastic supporter of Palés Matos who, as I quoted in the first section of this chapter, could write a book condemning racial prejudice *as such*, while at the same time denying that it was a problem in Puerto Rico, whose culture was quite simply Hispanic.¹² Admittedly Palés Matos was way ahead of his times in the centrality he attributes to Puerto Rico’s Afro-Caribbean legacy. That fact makes his limitations all the more interesting to examine, not as mere blind spots in his outlook but rather as indicators of a complex and often self-contradicting perspective that cannot be separated from a long history of colonialism and racism in the island—a long history that Palés Matos both criticized and, in spite of himself, also reflected.

We find a similar situation in Palés Matos second “Haitian” poem, “Lagarto verde” [“Green Lizard”]. The poem describes another “mimic man,” another black man absurdly (for Palés Matos) trying to copy the style of the French aristocracy:

The little Count of Lemonade,
 playful, tiny . . . Such a cute thing,
 frolicking around, tiny and playful,
 through the halls of Christophe's palace.

His merry little monkey face
 says to everyone: "yes."
 "Yes, Madame Cafolé, Monsieur Haiti,
 that way, this way"
 (Palés Matos, "Lagarto verde," 56r; my translation)

The description oozes irony, but once again the reader is left with the uneasy feeling that the same voice that mocks the conventions of aristocracy is also animalizing the black man who dares imitate the behavior of the white man—the comparison to a monkey being brutally racist (Palés Matos achieves an ironic effect by calling the Count "una monada," which can be colloquial Spanish for "cute," but may also mean "monkeylike"). We are offered further examples of the count's banal assimilation—"his social formula is: oh pardon! / His elegant word: volupté!"—until the poem reaches its unavoidable conclusion:

Oh, but don't you dare say "green lizard"
 in front of His Highness,
 because he immediately loses his head
 and his fine aristocratic manners are gone!

And there he goes, the Count of Lemonade,
 with his red dress-coat in disarray
 and his fierce jaw
 rigid in its epileptic tension . . .
 There he goes, with grotesque gestures
 multiplying the orangutans in the mirrors
 of King Christophe's palace!
 (Palés Matos, "Lagarto verde," 56r; my translation)

Like the duke in "Elegía del duque de la Mermelada," the count assumes an aristocratic disguise that hardly conceals his "true," primitive nature. This poem results even more problematic than the other one, because in "Elegía" there was at least an explicit plea to return to a primeval world that was as

exotic as it was primitive, and the lament for the abandonment of the African world of the ancestors is clearly expressed (through the crying of the caimans), even if mainly using Eurocentric language. In “Lagarto verde” the primitive nature of the count seems encoded within his very body, always ready to erupt at a minor provocation, such as the enunciation of the wrong phrase or image: here, “lagarto verde,” the green lizard, which becomes a totemic figure of sorts that presumably evokes and brings to the surface a primitive, animalistic realm of grotesque impulses. Although revolving around similar topics, “Elegía” deals with an African world that can only precariously be left behind; “Lagarto” deals with animalistic tendencies that only precariously can be repressed. Both approaches are part of the repertoire of stereotyping strategies employed by European colonialism and its essentialist logic.

Again, one *might*, although with even more difficulty, find ways to justify or explain Palés Matos’s choice of images. As I indicated above, such attempts seem somewhat forced, and it makes more sense to acknowledge that Palés Matos has an ambiguous, even conflictive relation to his subject matter. Such ambiguity is highlighted, not softened, by the fact his poetry was indeed groundbreaking in its foregrounding the importance of African roots in Caribbean culture, and of the Caribbean roots of Puerto Rican culture. In that context, his inability to let go of Eurocentric stereotypes about African culture should not be regarded as an incidental detail that can be brushed aside, but rather as an important, if unfortunate, aspect of his literary endeavor. It is to that literary endeavor we must turn now to shed some light on Palés Matos’s paradoxes, for ultimately it is my argument that his contradictions arise from his position as a member of a local intellectual elite that is attempting to position itself against the privileges of colonial elites put in place by various imperial interventions, while at the same time attempting not to disturb too severely its own position of relative privilege within that power structure.

Africa from Haiti from Puerto Rico

We may begin by asking why Palés Matos writes about the Haitian Revolution at all, what role it plays in the overall construction of *Tuntún de pasa y grifería*. The revolution’s place in “Canción festiva para ser llorada,” examined above, gives us a key. In that poem, the cultural and political domination of the Caribbean are dominant themes—the region’s destiny as what

the Dominican writer Juan Bosch calls “a frontier between empires.” In spite of the Caribbean’s vitality and rhythms, the presence of Babbitt and sugarcane interests casts a shadow of unrestrained exploitation (after all, the poem is a supposedly “festive” song that is in fact suppose to be “wept” or “wept over”). In the midst of that world, the Haitian events, in spite of Palés Matos’s exoticist approach, arise as the only attempt at real, concrete political resistance in the poem. It is only through Haiti that rebellion goes beyond joyous cultural survival to a militant revolt against colonial domination, a revolt that finds its ultimate expression in the extermination of the white master. Moreover, Haiti (in that poem and the others) preserves strong links to what Palés Matos seems to consider a black African culture in a state that is “uncontaminated” by European colonialism. It is, in fact, the severance of that link by the Haitian aristocracy that his two Haitian poems criticize (Aimé Césaire also regards Haiti as the place “where negritude rose for the first time” [*Notebook*, 15] in the Caribbean).

Throughout *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* Africa plays dual and complementary roles, one as cultural cradle of Caribbean identity, and one as a symbol for the region’s political resistance to colonial interests. Firstly, it plays an *identitary* role. Palés Matos’s defenders are certainly right in pointing out that, in spite of the limitations in his approach, Palés Matos is a foundational figure in his stubborn affirmation of Puerto Rico’s roots in an Afro-Caribbean culture. It was a sign of Palés Matos’s intellectual honesty, as well as of his knowledge of his context (having been born in Guayama, a town with a particularly strong and visible African heritage), which he insisted on privileging that aspect of Puerto Rican culture. In his autobiographical unfinished novel *Litoral* (included in *Obras*), Palés Matos comments on his fascination with black culture, particularly the stories of his family’s black cook, Lupe. Characteristically, in the novel that black world remains somewhat alien, something close and precious but also *other*.

Palés Matos also showed a shrewdness ahead of his time by moving (occasionally) beyond a purely essentialist view of identity towards a performative view, in which identities are articulated, circulated and reconfigured in subordination and response to political and social agendas and events. Responding to an interview question about “poesía criolla” in Puerto Rico—which in the island refers to poetry about, and often modeled on traditional music and diction of, “jíbaros” or “white” Puerto Rican mountain peasants, who are emblematic figures of Puerto Rico’s “true” identity— Palés Matos declared:

Yes, there is in fact a Creole poetry in Puerto Rico. What does not exist is the Creole Puerto Rico. The palm-tree hut, the sentimental and early-rising

peasant girl, the camaguey rooster, the sensual and seductive “triple” [a traditional string instrument], all of that occupies very little space in our life, it is as distant from us as the Eiffel Tower and Napoleon’s white horse. Except for Llorens, who every year produces eight or ten Creole “décimas” [popular ten-line stanza poems], and some local poets who write verses for their town’s Patron Saint Feasts, nobody, as far as I know, cultivates that kind of poetry in Puerto Rico. (*Obras*, 284; my translation)

The explicit mention of Luis Llorens Torres is quite significant in Palés Matos’s self-fashioning as poet. Easily the most popular Puerto Rican poet of the early 20th century, Llorens Torres was a nationalist writer who tried to preserve Puerto Rico’s Hispanic heritage and identity from U.S. colonial domination, and the Puerto Rico of his poetry is in sharp contrast with the Puerto Rico of *Tuntún de pasa y grifería*. Llorens Torres’s Hispanophile vision of Puerto Rican identity circulates in official circles to this day, and it was Palés Matos’s merit to offer an alternative vision grounded in the island’s Afro-Caribbean connections. In the interview, Palés Matos’s ironically observes how the images most commonly associated with Puerto Rico’s white creole identity only exist in the works of poets like Llorens Torres. Those observations in fact show a keen awareness of how the connections between identities and power (for example, the legitimization of certain identities and the exclusion of others) are mediated by cultural forms and institutions—in this particular case, the officially sanctioned poetry of Llorens Torres.¹³

Paradoxically, Palés Matos’s insights into the relations between identities and power also illuminate the limitations of his concerns about colonial “mimic men,” and his critique of figures like the Duke of Marmalade and the Count of Lemonade, however justified they might be at other levels. In this regard, we must highlight the ideas that Palés Matos expressed in his essay “Hacia una poesía antillana” [“Towards an Antillean Poetry”] (1932). Palés Matos wrote the essay in response to attacks from the writer José de Diego Padró, who criticized Palés Matos precisely for presenting his “black” poems as examples of Puerto Rican culture, a culture that for de Diego Padró (as for many intellectuals of that generation) was in fact “Western” or “European.” Palés Matos replied:

In general terms . . . it is true that when two cultures migrate from their places of origin and meet in a foreign environment, the one that possesses superior elements will eliminate and destroy the other one. But one must be very cautious when applying this concept, and one must not make a rigid and

unchanging law out of it. The new environment might turn out to be hostile to the dominant culture, and friendly toward the dominated culture. Or, through subtle tactics of the collective unconscious or simply in order to survive, the men who represent the dominated culture may adopt the forms and representations of the dominant culture and infiltrate it slowly, filling it with their own spirit, modifying and corroding those forms so efficiently that they can provoke the birth of a new cultural attitude. (*Obras*, 239; my translation)

The very notion of “superior” and “inferior” cultures—without questioning those categories and who gets to decide which is which—is an indicator of Palés Matos’s implicitly Eurocentric approach, an approach that some might explain as an understandable sign of Palés Matos’s historical period in his thought. What is striking about his words, however, is the keen awareness that cultural forms imposed on any group as part of a process of domination can be used as a disguise, as a ruse, by the dominated group, so that apparent assimilation can hide sustained resistance. In the Caribbean, syncretistic religions such as Vodou and Santería are the best-known examples of that practice: under the guise of Catholic practices, African slaves were able to preserve the spirit of many of their ancestral religious beliefs. From our perspective in this study, what is striking is that Palés Matos’s clear understanding of this phenomenon does not make him pause at the moment of writing his “Haitian” poems. Christophe’s court may not constitute a good example of strategic assumption of dominant cultural forms, but a good case could be made for the need *all* Haitian leaders since independence have felt to appear “European” (thus, “civilized” in a colonial global order) to foreign capital interests that were more than ready to cut them loose. Therefore, Palés Matos’s own essay makes it clear that the poetic portrayal of Haitians as mindless imitators who betray their ancestral totems is at best limited and unfair, even leaving aside its racist Eurocentric assumptions. In a collection of poems that presents many examples of strategic submission (such as the “mulata’s” flirtation with Uncle Sam in “Plena del menéalo”), one might expect a more imaginative portrayal of the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution.

Even more surprisingly, Palés Matos himself, a few paragraphs later in the essay we are commenting, offers a significantly corrected portrayal of Haiti:

It is very hard for a culture that pretends to be superior to destroy the roots of a supposedly inferior culture, as long as the vigilant awareness of that

other race has not lost its vitality. Haiti offers a clear example. Haitian blacks speak French, they officially practice the Catholic religion, and they created, thus assimilating themselves to the spirit of Western democratic institutions, a republic. Cult Haitians are educated in France, they read Victor Hugo, they obtain titles from the Sorbonne. The bourgeois class knows any frivolous variation in Paris's fashion, and it is said that in Port-au-Prince, during festive days, they walk around with the clothes and the solemn manners that belong to people of high status. However, inside, the Haitian remains unchanged. And there is nothing as radically opposed to the French spirit—clarity, lightness, rationalism—as the Haitian spirit—sensuality, superstition, witchcraft. (*Obras*, 240; my translation)¹⁴

Palés Matos's striking words encapsulate well the strengths and limitations of his approach. He clearly affirms a Caribbean culture that is distinct from that of Europe, even if Europe is evidently one of its components. That culture has survived, and has been shaped, in the process of political resistance to metropolitan interests. There is even the subtle suggestion that the "superiority" of one culture over another is far from being a clear matter—notice his reference to a "supposedly" inferior culture—a position that was well ahead of its times. Moreover, there is a stab at the "bourgeois class," whose attempt to display an internalized Eurocentrism (characteristic of all elites in power throughout postindependence Latin America) we may describe in terms of what Anibal Quijano calls the "coloniality of power." However, just as in the poems, Palés Matos's "celebration" of Haiti's ability to develop and preserve its own culture as it wears the disguise of French culture is severely undermined by his description of what Haitian culture is *really* about for him: sensuality, superstition, witchcraft—the taxonomy of racist, sexist, Eurocentric categories that imperial discourse put in circulation. To Quijano's coloniality of power, we must add here Lugones's coloniality of gender, which we see displayed in Palés Matos's feminization of Haiti's racial other, and in the automatic eroticized objectification of "the feminine" that his celebration of Haiti entails.

The second role of Africa in Palés Matos's poetry is connected precisely to that awareness of the links between identity and power in a colonial context: Africa works as a symbol of *political* resistance against American and European interests in the Caribbean region, and in Palés Matos's imaginary Haiti is the Caribbean region that remains the closest to that African spirit. Throughout *Tuntún*, Africa is implicitly or explicitly associated with moments or figures of rebellion *in the Caribbean*. A few examples should

suffice to illustrate that point. It is significant how the very first poem of the “Tronco” section of the book, presumably dealing with the African “trunk” of the symbolic tree of Puerto Rico’s culture, offers a symbolic geography for that “trunk”: “Pasan tierras rojas, islas de betún / Haití, Martinica, Congo, Camerún” (508) [“Red lands pass by, shoeshine black islands / Haiti, Martinique, Congo, Cameroon” (my translation)]. In that Middle Passage that connects the Caribbean to Africa, Haiti occupies a central role. The second poem, “Numen,” a celebration, as its title indicates, of African ancestral beliefs, is built around the refrain: “African forest—Tembandumba— / Haitian jungle—Macandal.” Tembandumba is a mythical matriarchal figure used by Palés Matos to represent Africa (in this poem; she becomes an embodiment of the Antillean woman of color in “Majestad negra”), but it is significant that the other pole of the Caribbean’s Afrocentric resistance is Macandal (whom we already saw in “Canción festiva”), one of the main precursors of the Haitian revolution (who also plays an important role in Carpentier’s *El reino de este mundo*).

Poems like “Ñam ñam” and “Ñáñigo al cielo” also present Africans or characters connected to African belief systems emblemizing resistance. “Ñam ñam,” a poem about cannibalism, could be criticized for its stereotypical representation of African cannibals, but it can also be read as an allegory of political resistance when one realizes that in the poem Africa devours “its meal of explorers and missionaries” (518; my translation), that is to say, emblematic figures of European colonial penetration. In “Ñáñigo al cielo” the ñáñigo, a member of an Afro-Cuban syncretistic religion, subverts and carnivalizes the heavenly hierarchies established by Christian authority. In “Lamento,” black men from Havana to Zimbabwe lament the malefic influence of a “white shadow” in their world. And in “Plena del menéalo” a personified Caribbean island dances and shakes its body to African rhythms with “goce rumbero” [“with rumba joy”]; the political implications of that dance are explicit: “Keep shaking your stern as you dance / because it is that dancing / that saves you / from the monsieur who leers at you / from beyond the sea” (616; my translation). At the end of the poem we find the American counterpart of that European “monsieur” (humorously Hispanicized in the poem as a “musiú”) who also surveys lasciviously the island-woman; the poet’s advice is: “shake it, shake it, / so that you drive Uncle Sam mad!” (616; my translation).

In all of the examples quoted above, and in other subtler ones throughout the book, one finds the Caribbean’s African roots playing an important strategic role as a symbol of the region’s cultural autonomy and political

resistance to European and U.S. colonial interests. In that context, it makes sense that Haiti, as a prime example of that resistance, should have a significant place in Palés Matos's poetry, from the very first poems of the book, as we have seen. It is also in that context that Palés Matos's condemnation of the Haitian "mimic men" of Christophe's court acquires its full scope: for Christophe and his minions are not only oppressing Haiti but also corrupting the symbolic importance of Haiti's revolution for a Caribbean realm still under the chains of imperial domination. It is precisely because of the important cultural and political role Africa plays in Palés Matos's poetry that the ambiguity towards the African elements in his own poetry should be taken seriously, as a paradoxical but constitutive dimension of his work, rather than simply an accident or a mere remnant of the prejudices of his times.

The ambivalence that Palés Matos shows towards the African element in Caribbean culture—which becomes almost synonymous with Haiti in some of his poems, as the "Mackandal—Tembandumba" axis shows—is clearly shown in his "Haitian poems," but is also noticeable in several others. One example is "Preludio en boricua" ["Prelude in Boricua"], an extraordinary poem that opens the collection and introduces the aesthetic and political project of the book, displaying and performing all the stylistic and thematic trademarks of Palés Matos's poetry. However, the poem mysteriously ends by self-reflectively invoking the book's title (*Tuntún de pasa y grifería*, which I translate below as "black and mulatto tom-toms") and declaring:

Black and mulatto tom-toms,
 this book that is delivered to your hands,
 I composed one day with Antillean ingredients. . . .
 . . . and when all is said and done: wasted time
 that ends up boring me.
 Something that I glimpsed or sensed,
 little that has been actually lived,
 much that is made up and concocted.

(Palés Matos, "Preludio," 503; my translation)

The poem's striking end can be (and has been) read ironically, as a mischievous indicator of the ultimate textual nature of the poetic material that follows—a reading that would highlight Palés Matos's awareness (as indicated in the quotes above from "Hacia una poesía antillana") of the constructedness of identitary images.¹⁵ In a context of U.S. colonial domination

to which many members of the local intelligentsia were responding by an affirmation of Puerto Rico's "true" Hispanic identity, Palés Matos was very much rehearsing and "concocting" Afro-Caribbean images as an antidote to the Hispanophile ones. However, taking into account several important moments in the book itself, it is also legitimate to read the poem's ending somewhat more "literally," that is to say, not simply as a tongue-in-cheek pointer to the textual, "concocted" character of its content but rather in terms of the *affective distance* it establishes between the poet and his material.

The disclaimer that the book is in some ways "wasted time," that not much in it comes from lived experience, and that it ultimately bores the poet, allows Palés Matos to keep some *distance* from the universe his poems articulate. Such a reading is supported by the poet's attitude in other poems in the book, with his Haitian poems constituting prime examples. But there are other compositions that reveal Palés Matos's conflicted relation to his surroundings, such as the somber "Topography," which is not part of *Tuntún's* main structure but was included by the poet in both editions of the book (in a section titled "Other poems"):

This is the barren, stepmother land
 where the cactus grows.
 Chalky saltpeter land
 that birds traverse, broken by thirst . . .
 Fear. Desolation. Asphyxia. Everything here
 sleeps smothered . . .

(Palés Matos, "Topografía," 421; my translation)

There is also the well-known "Pueblo" (a word that may mean both "town" and "people" in Spanish), constructed around the refrain: "Pity, oh Lord, pity for my poor town / where my poor people will die of nothing!" (424; my translation). In these poems and others, the poet's personal malaise becomes entangled with what he perceives as the stagnation of his island, a stagnation with clear political dimensions rooted in a colonial history. The Afro-Caribbean-centered poems certainly bring a more rebellious attitude to that political situation, but as we saw in the ending of "Prelude in Boricua," they do not eliminate the poet's skeptical distance from his surrounding universe.

We can see another example of the poet's ambivalent position in the poem "Kalahari" (541–542), structured around the persistent repetition of the refrain, "Why now, the word *Kalahari*?" The word "Kalahari," which mysteriously and obsessively keeps arising in the poet's mind, invokes "a bay with

clear coconut trees, / with hundreds of monkeys engaged in / a disorderly series of acrobatic leaps" (541–42; my translation), in one word, Africa (an Africa whose coconut trees constitute a symbolic link to the Caribbean). But Africa in the poem is sheer sonority, a perplexing word, a vague nostalgia, a reminder of something important that insists on imposing itself on the poet but never quite becomes a *presence* in the poem or for the poet. In many ways "Kalahari" captures Palés Matos's relation to Africa in his book. When it is a matter of facing "Uncle Sam," the poet does not hesitate to invoke that Africa; when it is matter of the claims that Africa makes on him, the poet hesitates, and takes a step back.¹⁶

The poet writes about Africa in the Caribbean, he even celebrates it, but at the same time maintains an ironic detachment that betrays an anxiety not to be too closely identified with his material.¹⁷ Palés Matos often seems caught between his commitment to take a stand against the historical injustices against the black populations of the Caribbean, and his own position of racial and cultural privilege. He remains constant in his commitment while at the same time retaining a distance that never quite gets to talk to power *from* an Afro-Caribbean perspective, but rather *about* it.¹⁸

Palés Matos declared quite explicitly that he never intended to write "black poetry" but rather "Antillean poetry."¹⁹ However, it is evident that he considered the African presence in the Caribbean to be fundamental and foundational. *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* strongly suggests that no aesthetic celebration or political defense of the region can even be considered without privileging that African dimension. Throughout the text, African cultural elements (such as the percussive rhythms and dancing) and black struggles for emancipation (such as the Haitian Revolution) are given thematic privilege in the articulation of the region's cultural and political personality. Europeans and North Americans often appear as greedy tourists, or colonialists, in poems like "Intermedios del hombre blanco." The presence of Africa in the Caribbean also governs the book's structure: the text is divided in three sections, and the first one, "tronco," is composed of poems that refer to Africa (the same Africa that the duke of Marmalade and the Count of Lemonade "betray") as the trunk or ground of Caribbean culture. In many regards, what Palés Matos intuited in his poems is what C. L. R. James expressed quite transparently in his 1962 appendix to *The Black Jacobins*, where he writes:

The West Indians were and had always been Western-educated. West Indian society confined black men to a very narrow strip of social territory. The first

step to freedom was to go abroad. *Before they could begin to see themselves as a free and independent people they had to clear from minds the stigma that anything African was inherently inferior and degraded.* The road to West Indian national identity lay through Africa. (402; James's italics)

Palés Matos also feels the need to “go abroad” in his poems, particularly to those other West Indian islands (the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean) which, although having histories that are very different from Puerto Rico’s in many regards, also share an element to which Palés Matos gave as much importance as James does: the African presence. Palés Matos’s Africa lies primordially in those other Caribbean islands (including Haiti). What the mirror of those other islands reveals to Palés Matos’s Puerto Rican eyes is not only the fundamental presence of Africa’s culture all throughout the Caribbean but also the coloniality of power and the *coloniality of being* that have systematically marked anything African as “*inherently degraded and inferior.*” Any road toward self-emancipation (regardless of how we define it, and Palés Matos was certainly a supporter of Puerto Rico’s political independence) must overcome that stigma, which Palés Matos saw not only in the colonial metropolis (Babbitt and Tartarin) but also encountered among Puerto Rico’s local cultural elite.

Thus, although Palés Matos has been accused of portraying exotic, ahistorical black figures, the fact is that his main interest lies in Africa as a cultural and political symbol of resistance from the perspective of the colonized Caribbean region. One could argue that the center of gravity of his book is the axis created by the refrain of his poem “Numen:” “African forest—Tembandumba / Haitian jungle—Macandal” (516). In other words, *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* takes as its point of departure the Middle Passage and the historically grounded experience of the Black diaspora, rather than some mythical, precolonial Africa.

However exotic and picturesque Africa’s rhythms, customs, and beliefs may look to a poet who, after all, had links to the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, the poems suggest that Palés Matos was quite aware that, in the Caribbean, “Africa” can only be contemplated through the lens of (and for Palés Matos it remains symbolically inextricable from) “Haiti” and all it represents, with its misery and revolt. Palés Matos’s Caribbean perspective grounds the black experience in the historical legacies of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery, on the one hand, and resistance and rebellion, on the other. Haiti with its revolution becomes the embodiment of those historical, pan-Caribbean realities. Moreover, for Palés Matos the

violent events in Haiti and the seemingly benign tourist showcase of Puerto Rico are two poles of a spectrum of Afro-Caribbean experience forged by the racist imprint of colonial interests deeply imbricated in the development of Euro-American capitalism. (In “Prelude in boricua” he describes the “golden Niagara of tourists” that endlessly wander the Caribbean by pointing out, “tomorrow they will be stockholders / of any sugarcane mill / and then they will get off with the money” [502; my translation]). Thus, the aesthetic celebration of the Caribbean, as well as its political defense, point towards Africa: an Africa linked to both Haiti and Puerto Rico by imperial designs, and by the logic of the colonality of power and the ontological claims of the colonality of being.

Colonial Ambivalence

How to read, then, a poet who expresses quite openly, albeit often ironically, his anticolonial stand, who shows awareness of the significance of the Haitian Revolution in the context of a Caribbean resistance to imperialism, yet who voices his criticism of Haiti, however justified at some levels, from such a blatantly Eurocentric perspective? At this point, rather than easily lean towards one of these two readings, Palés Matos as Caribbean critic of colonialism vs. Palés Matos the Eurocentric racist, I want to stay with the tension, because I think it encapsulates his position as a Caribbean intellectual.

Palés Matos’s poetic performance in *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* is a rhetorical balancing act that creates a precarious logic of exclusion/inclusion—the poet participates in the carnival he creates, but he also keeps his ironic distance. That distance, one should also remember, is also *aesthetic*: one often has the impression, when reading Palés Matos, that he is simply unable or unwilling to let a striking image or metaphor go by (particularly if it is appropriately “African sounding”), and that he never forgets to articulate his own location/role first and foremost as *a poet*.²⁰ His virtuoso performance allows the poet to remain in agonistic tension with regard to his conflictive imperatives. On the one hand, the poems articulate his political resistance to the imperial designs for the archipelago, a resistance that in Palés Matos often takes the forms of satire and irony. On the other hand, the poet attempts to find a balance between participation in the Caribbean’s heteroglossic, plural, Afro-Creole performance, and lyrical distance anchored in ironic disdain. Palés Matos articulates a space for himself as a poet and intellectual by remaining at a safe distance from all his possible roles. He

writes against white colonizers but seems to feel the need to distinguish himself from that black world that he attempts to defend. We can see the poet's anxiety in the surprising ending of "Preludio en boricua," and the paradoxical "Haitian poems" that we examined.

The point I would like to emphasize here is that we can link the ambiguity of Palés Matos's poetic performance to the colonial context and logic that his work quite clearly addresses. Although the way Palés Matos articulates his position (through the elaboration of an ironic distance that bizarrely combines anti-imperialist commitment with racist and sexist stereotypes) is unique, his performance in fact reflects the conundrum of other Caribbean and (post)colonial intellectuals. Constantly shifting between worlds and languages; speaking in favor of subaltern populations from positions of relative privilege; often silencing those they defend by the very act of speaking on their behalf; frequently at an impasse between politics and aesthetics, (post) colonial intellectuals constantly face the anxiety of betraying one or more of their multiple and, for them, equally valid commitments. As one short example from another Caribbean island, we can think of the Nobel prize-winning Saint Lucian poet Derek Walcott, who, although writing well after Palés Matos, occasionally expresses similar concerns, the main difference being that Walcott explicitly thematizes them in his poetry. In a dramatic passage from his 1990 epic poem *Omeros*, this potential conflict between political commitment and aesthetics, on the one hand, and between solidarity and privilege on the other, is taken to its ultimate consequences:

Didn't I want the poor
to stay in the same light so that I could transfix
them in amber, the afterglow of an empire,
preferring a shed of palm-thatch with tilted sticks
to that blue bus-stop? Didn't I prefer a road
from which tracks climbed into the thickening syntax
of colonial travelers, the measured prose I read
as a schoolboy?

.....

Had they waited for me
to develop my craft? Why hallow that pretense
of preserving what they left, the hypocrisy
of loving them from hotels, a biscuit-tin fence
smothered in love-vines, scenes to which I was attached
as blindly as Plunkett with his remorseful research?

Art is history's nostalgia, it prefers a thatched
roof to a concrete factory

.....

Hadn't I made their poverty my paradise?

(Walcott, *Omeros*, 227–28)

In a disturbing twist of the logic behind the ideal of *littérature engagé*, the poem feeds on the reality it is presumably trying to transform. Torn between divided loyalties, the poem may not turn its back to the wretched of the earth, nor truly commit to their deliverance. Each (post)colonial artist or intellectual finds his/her own precarious solution, or lack of solution, for that conundrum. While Walcott attempts to address the problem explicitly thematizing it in his poem, Palés Matos attempts to give both aesthetics and politics their due, remaining committed to both and alienated from both.

Thus, one may argue that in spite of its joyous immersion in the heteroglossic and politically charged realities of the Caribbean, *Tuntún de pasa y grifería* is partly (but very importantly) about the articulation of a “safe” space for the poet himself at the same time that colonial politics in the Caribbean are confronted and the archipelago’s creolized heterogeneity celebrated. That “safe” space is not clearly defined in the book, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is defined by omission, by default. Every time Palés Matos marks his distance from his surroundings, as he does in the end of “Preludio en boricua,” or in the racist rhetoric of his “Haitian poems,” what emerges is a space of relative “stability” and aesthetic distance that attempts not to be ultimately defined or governed by history with its legacy of colonial, racial, and cultural conflicts. “I address those issues but I am not defined by them,” the poet seems to say, as he seeks refuge in an ironic distance that naturally is also a manifestation of historically inherited privilege. As is the case with many colonial and postcolonial writers, there is a sense of nostalgia that pervades Palés Matos’s poetry and that of many his Caribbean peers: nostalgia for a space of stability (with regard to political struggles) and unity (with regards to identity) that the colonial history of the Caribbean has rendered impossible. And by colonialism here I do not refer specifically to the political status of Puerto Rico (which Palés Matos opposed²¹), but rather to the imperial legacy of dispossession and dependence that still governs most of the Caribbean region, sometimes in neocolonial forms, from the blocked Cuba to the French “departements d’outre mer.”²²

But if colonialism has made the dream of stable and unified identity impossible, it has also made the wish for its fulfillment unavoidable. As I

discussed in the introduction, it is the colonial condition itself, and the colonizers' *claim* to a stable and unified self, that fuels that desire in the subaltern, in spite of the fact that such a self was always already a fiction for both colonizer and colonized.²³ There was never a happy Edenic time when the self was not fractured by difference and conflict, rather than actually articulated by them. The colonial condition, however, revolves around the myth of that "lack" which affects the colonized but not the colonizer—what Mignolo calls "the colonial difference." Palés Matos strives in his poetry to attack the system that perpetuates that myth while still partially believing it himself: his poetry bravely defends a creolized, heterogeneous, rebellious Afro-Caribbean space while refusing, or remaining unable, to fully inhabit that space.

In *Tuntún de pasa y grifería*, Palés Matos's poetic subject is characterized precisely by an avoidance of definition that attempts to remain politically committed while also staying ironically aloof. In a difficult to sustain (but masterfully sustained) performance, the poet attempts to articulate himself as a unified and stable subject impermeable to the mighty tensions of the Caribbean while also articulating and voicing the all-encompassing heterogeneities and colonial conflicts that have shaped the region. I agree with most contemporary critics of Palés Matos's poetry who point out to his irony and playfulness as clear indicators that he does not truly believe in the possibility of such a stable, impermeable self. But I do suggest that his clear engagement with (and disappointment with) Caribbean colonial politics, combined with his very problematic representation of the "identity" of those Caribbean Afro-descendants who have been at the center of the region's history, present us with a Caribbean intellectual deeply troubled about his own position in the universe that he is representing. Palés Matos's irony not only mocks essentialist metropolitan certitudes or (equally colonial) Hispanophile alternatives but also shields him from their pull and betrays an unfulfilled desire to find a "safe" location from which to address the coloniality of power and the coloniality of being in the Caribbean.

As I suggested earlier, it is not surprising that the role of Haiti in Palés Matos's poetry reveals so clearly the gaps and contradictions in the poet's lyric self-fashioning, for Haiti itself, with its misery and its rebelliousness, has become for the whole Caribbean an emblem and embodiment of the colonial condition and its discontents, past and present. Palés Matos's ironic alienation from both the political arena and the ivory tower is certainly not a "solution" to his impasse, but it remains a compelling representation of the dilemma in a very specific context. From several of his poems it seems that Palés Matos would be happiest if able to remain "position-less," dancing and arguing from

a safely cut off position. That, of course, is impossible, and Palés Matos is forced to perpetually shift positions throughout his poems, sometimes within the same poem: Eurocentric mocker of black attempts to both inhabit and challenge the European “myth of modernity,” and committed defender of the Caribbean’s African dimensions in the face of that myth. Although such a strategy provokes little but perplexity in the reader at times, it is a perplexity that adequately captures the paradoxes and insights, the agony and hope of the region’s (post) colonial legacies and continuing struggles. Palés Matos’s poetry remains, often in spite of the poet himself, even in the aspects that one may justifiably criticize, undeniably Caribbean in its performance.