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Ambivalent Stardom and the “Race” for Modernity in *El negro que tenía el alma blanca*, de Benito Perojo

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In America, when a Negro is accepted, one often says, in order to separate him from the rest of his race, ‘He is a Negro, of course, but his soul is white.’ (Bastide 315)¹

Film provided a space where colonial nostalgia, anxieties about modernity, and new prospects for empire could be rehearsed.² The colonial failure in both the Americas and in North Africa played itself out through popular nostalgia in the mass media of the twenties and thirties, where manufactured notions of biological destiny justified Spain’s need to conquer, and black Africa’s need to be conquered. Viewed from this framework, the protagonist of Benito Perojo’s *El negro que tenía el alma blanca* [*The Black Man With the White Soul*], Peter Wald, undoubtedly threatened a Spanish mentality still reeling from the “1898 disaster,” and in particular, the Spanish laborer forced to fight against the North African rebels. More importantly, *El negro*’s politics of racial representation, which appeared in its references to skin color and colonial scenarios, and its simultaneous preoccupation with modernity and stardom discourse, created an intercultural arena for contemporary discussions on race and modernity in Spain.

The film’s cultural context is framed by the triangular relationship that developed between Spain, Africa and Cuba. Within this framework the racially saturated text of *El negro* and its representation of stardom constitutes a foundational fiction of “becoming,” embedded as it is within a turbulent

capitalist modernity and a post-colonial situation. As we shall see, racial essentialism, colonial nostalgia, and the narrative of modernity (as seen through the prism of stardom) shadow the triangular relationship of Peter, the white woman he loves, Emma, and her father. The same conditions underlie real-life entertainment and the authorship of novels and films, with their particular investments in questions of nation and identity. *El negro* commands our interest because its characters manifest the dynamic, paradoxical, indeterminate subjectivity that also surfaced in other forms of popular entertainment, consumer artifacts, and political discourses.

Shown in Spanish theatres in 1926, a year before the release of Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer*, *El negro* was a silent film melodrama about the inability of a successful black jazz dancer to overcome Spanish society's racist prohibitions on intermarriage between whites and blacks. The film follows the stories of Emma and Peter. Pedro Valdés, the son of former Cuban slaves, works his way from restaurant bell-boy to prominence as Peter Wald, the internationally celebrated prodigy of the Charleston and Fox Trot. But wealth and fame pale in comparison to Wald's anxiety about his blackness, an insecurity fueled by repeated rejections from the white women in his life. In Madrid, Wald falls in love with the lily-skinned Emma Cortadell, a lower class, unpaid theater apprentice who quickly rises to stardom as Peter's dance partner. Emma is nevertheless horrified by Wald's skin color. Her aversion to Peter's blackness has an immediate, debilitating effect: Peter weakens, and like a noble martyr-saint, dies attempting to transcend his materiality and become a soul, transparent in color, and like whiteness, invisible. Peter's death will dissipate anxieties about ambiguous racial

identities by reinforcing an essentialist color scheme. Through Peter's death, whiteness establishes itself as the emblem for a modern Spain struggling to negotiate the different meanings of stardom.

In *El negro*, stardom is instantiated in the form of cosmopolitan and Jazz styles, even though it remains entrenched in colonial, and pre-Darwinist discourses. Steeped in this ambivalence, representations of Peter and Emma in blackface and in situations of performance and passing, elucidate how filmic stardom in later decades will incorporate a *castizo*, or pure blooded, discourse of Spanish identity into folkloric characters and their star texts. *El negro* dramatizes stardom through the *castiza* Emma, the prototype of the later *folklórica*, who will win over audiences with her talented representation of African American entertainment, symbolizing the triumph of white Spanish stardom over cosmopolitan and dangerously hybrid colonial identities.

The shift in visual and narrative cinematic codes that showcases Emma's brand of white individualism and success will prove decisive for later films that treat the performance and embodiment of stardom. For modernity means the ability to produce narratives of stardom in which Spaniards become equal as producers of modern capitalist culture that can vie with other film-making capitals of the world: Paris, Berlin, and Hollywood. Star culture, therefore, *is* modernity. As *El negro* conveys to us, the narrative of the undiscovered, underclass but talented girl who only needs grooming to be made into a star happens through her engagement with modernity. The following aims to examine this encounter with modernity that manifests itself through alternating scenarios of attraction and repulsion.

The ambivalent meanings produced through both the undermining of an essentialist color scheme and the emphatic contrast of black and white produce the modern split subject. Emma's hysteria, for instance, is caused by the repression of her desire and the attraction of Peter's victim status. For Peter is indeed an object of desire: talented, handsome and good, he plays a star who is better than the other characters can sometimes admit. This push and pull of identity and difference was surely experienced by Spanish spectators. Riveted by performances of entertainers like Peter Wald, they were led to think about their own modernness or anti-modernness, and to project their longing/loathing onto the racialized performer. But possibilities for a utopian melding with the Other disappear in the recurrent narrative and ideological closures: Peter becomes a figure against whom a white Castilian, or even Andalusian, identity can contrast, but also affirm itself, while Emma signifies the contradictory nature of domestic innocence fused with stardom. The subjectivities that ideological apparatuses offer us rarely include such dangerously ambiguous both/and identities. These spaces are foreclosed by the filmic reflection of a racially divided society and the insistence on a biological essentialism in which the black man becomes the "epidermalized" locus of fear.³ The title used for distribution in France, for instance, *La Fatalité du destin*, and the poster that read, "Piel negra-Alma blanca" reaffirm this inevitability of race, as does one of the first French reviews of the film:

El abismo que separa dos razas, la revuelta insuperable de la carne blanca contra la de color oscuro, tal es el tema de la novela [...].

The abyss that separates two races, the insurmountable revolt of white flesh against dark, such is the theme of the novel [...].⁴

Emma's repeated rejections of Peter's blackness thus underscore the impossibility of either mestizaje, miscegenation, or nuanced tones of skin color, which are symbolized in scenes where Peter and Emma dance together or black and white objects mingle in the film's mis-en-scène. Discourses of scientific racism, such as eugenics—racial categorizing for the purpose of measuring the "progress" of "civilization"—and colonial nostalgia inform the film's novelistic and theatrical antecedents. Fusing with these discourses, the film's visual references to consumerism incorporate primitivism and ideological optics that mark the black body as irretrievably contaminated, thereby reiterating Peter's inevitable failure as an appropriate subject for a Spanish modernity. Such tension between desire and fear—an organizational mechanism of colonial discourse—is manifested most clearly by Peter's status as both a former colonial subject and a Jazz star; modern yet not modern, and thus threatening.

The film, *El negro que tenía el alma blanca*, was closely adapted from Alberto Insúa's popular novel of that name and published in the weekly magazine *La voz* in 1922. The second-most reproduced novel during the period of 1900 to 1936, *El negro* appeared in more than 40 editions, sold over a million copies, and was eventually translated into Portuguese, English, Swedish, French, and German (Fortuño Llorens 20). In 1930, Federico Oliver's fairly faithful theatrical version of *El negro* debuted in

Madrid, while in 1937 Insúa published *El negro's* sequel, *La sombra de Peter Wald/The Shadow of Peter Wald*, in which Peter's specter haunts the sad romance of Emma Cortadell, destined to marry a white man, "demasiado blanco, de una blancura de márfil/ too white, of an ivory white" (212). Two film remakes—1934 and 1951—are probably the most lasting legacy of the *El negro* story cycle, as the books are little known and the only copy of the silent 1926 film remains in Madrid's national film archives.

The proliferation of the story cycle of Peter Wald and Emma Cortadell—three film versions, two novels and a play that span almost thirty years—begs the question of why this narrative continued to remain so popular with Hispanic audiences. The core *histoire* of the 1922 novel *El negro* derived from a whole tradition of racial melodrama in Spain, which had appeared in literary, dramatic, and visual incarnations, but its sensibility overlapped with forms of racial media and spectacle and with fashionable topics such as miscegenation and the seedy world of the popular theatre. Fortuño Llorens, one of the few contemporary critics writing about the novel, attributes its success to a heterogeneous public looking for "distraction, morbidity, eroticism, and sentimentality" which they found in the weekly serial magazines through which *El negro* and other erotic novels of the day were marketed (29).

The *El negro* film of 1926, would satisfy the demand for (acceptably) transgressive material by projecting bold, risky situations of mixing. Moreover, literacy statistics indicate that the public was 52% illiterate in 1920 and 44% in 1930, thus implying that the film not only reached a broader section of the Spanish public but that it also had more impact than the novel. Because *El negro* belongs to the modern studio spectacular

that, influenced by Hollywood, flourished in French cinema during the second half of the 1920s, it lavished its public with scenes of cabarets, entertainment spectacles and elegant, bourgeois locales (Gubern/Sanchez Vidal). Its cosmopolitanism entailed Paris cityscapes teeming with automobiles, escalators, and modern attitudes toward gender and race.

Successful entertainment satisfied a desire for modernity through an awareness of foreign trends, yet initial criticism in film magazines of Perojo's *El negro* derided the director's cosmopolitanism: aesthetically his films were said to lack Spanish personality and to be devoid of nationalist interest (Gubern 118). "Cosmopolitanism" contained a variety of meanings—it could refer to the Fascist insult of "Jewish internationalism," or to the extreme left's condemnation of Perojo's bourgeois themes, as opposed to international proletarianism (118). But clearly, for Spanish critics, Perojo did not demonstrate commitment to what they saw as the project of Spanish national cinema. In effect, Perojo had to choose between artistic integrity and profit, even though his reasons for returning to foreign studios were ultimately that Spanish capitalists were unwilling to invest in films. When shooting *El negro*, for example, he resorted to the Joinville studios outside of Paris that had readily available and up-to-date sets and lighting, and in the process used foreign technicians and actors (Perojo thought it was virtually impossible to find elegant actors in Spain) (Gubern 118, 1994). Perojo's efforts to represent Spain as modern despite its material obstacles led critics to claim his film was not realistic or authentic.

El negro capitalized on desire and anxiety about modernity by presenting race in a "racy" way, that is, through Emma's liaison with Peter, her performance of blackface, her

contact with jazz dance, and her metamorphosis into the “real” star of the film. Commotion over the film, however, was just as much as a product of audience’s familiarity with racy tropes about mixing as with their ignorance of them. As Luis Quesada states, the film mixed the cabaret life of Madrid with similar narrative fragments from Paris and Cuba and scenes from the jazz world of a black dancer, all novel themes for the unworldly Spaniard, agape at the spectacle of foreign or historically exotic images and places (225-27). To understand the film’s impact as a story of becoming requires, however, a contextualization of the racially saturated texts of popular spectacles that were available to Spanish audiences of the time. It is in this horizon of expectation that we can devise what all that excitement and nervousness about modernity was really about.

Perojo’s *El negro* was certainly not the first instance of blackface performance, referred to in Spanish as “negrito,” “cara negrita,” or “cara embetunada.” In Spain, in the Seventeenth century Golden Age theatre, white actors in blackface would parody Africans, while the *bufo* genre lasted well into the Twentieth century (García Martínez 270). Although also performed in Spain, *Teatro bufó* was principally a pre-independence Cuban theatre tradition that parodied esteemed Spanish literary and theatrical traditions, often flaunting the threat that Cubanness represented to Spanish cultural hegemony. A *revue* style theatre combining short comic plays, music, dance and displays of vernacular culture, the *teatro bufó* peaked in popularity in the 1860s in Cuba, coinciding with the protracted struggle for independence from Spain. Reinventing the comedy of manners, it developed a repertoire of stock “black” characters invariably played by white actors

in blackface. Jill Meredith Lane argues that the *teatro bufó*’s protagonist, the “negrito” character performed in blackface by white actors, allowed white *criollos* to indulge themselves in racist spectacles. By doing so, they assuaged racial panic and the general anxiety over the Africanization of Cuba, affirming white status over black in a colonial hierarchy, yet reaffirming a nationalist sentiment that celebrated racial diversity (3).

The influx to Spain of black entertainers that started in the late nineteenth century, however, brought the popular stage and early cinema into a more intimate relationship with black entertainment. As early as 1880, entertainers like the acrobats Paolo and Panlo could be seen in Madrid’s Teatro-Circo Price, as well as other venues for dance and Black spiritual song (García Martínez 17). García Martínez notes that at the end of the nineteenth century, the owner of Teatro Apolo in Madrid fired an actor from the zarzuela *Cádiz*, who was playing a mulatto, in order to replace him with a black servant who had no theatrical experience. García Martínez does not explain why the white actor was fired, but it seems clear that the public wanted to see a black actor, not a white one with make-up.

The writer and intellectual, Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, described the first two decades of the twentieth century as an explosion of jazz venues, of the craze for ragtime, and the cake-walk, noting the 1905 cake-walk performances of Mister Johnson in Barcelona’s Alegría Circus in 1905, and of black dancers in the 1910 operetta, *La niña mimada* (Aurelio González Rendón) (García Martínez 18). Indeed, the Spanish intelligentsia closely followed the developments of The New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance, appropriating (a problematic) *négritude* in a desire to find new inspiration and to “keep up” with modernity. Such

entertainment braved a new world while it begged to be exploited. The attraction of the modern figured largely in popular theatre owners' decisions on content, as can be seen in the theatre magazine, *Comedias y Comediantes* (August 1, 1910), which pretended it had found a recipe for success for cabaret owners: "dos gotas de garrotín, cuatro de machicha, tres gramos de cake-walk, cincuenta miligramos de cuplé sicalíptico y media docena de tipples hermosas/two drops of the garrotín (a popular late Nineteenth century dance), four of machicha, three grams of cake-walk, fifty miligrams of a sexy song and a half dozen cute girls" (García Martínez 19). César González Ruano in his memoirs describes Maxim's, the first "bar americano" in Madrid: "La puerta la guardaba un negro gigante vestido con una librea aparatosa y que vendía cocaína en unos frasquitos de crystal marrón que contenían un gramo y era de la casa Merck" (Amorós 162). Federico García Lorca's observations on theatre revealed his fascination with the *révue nègre*, in which the best actors were black, "mimos insuperables" attesting to how audiences clamored for black theatre over white.⁵ What can be surmised from histories of entertainment, theatre and film reviews, is that imported entertainment that foregrounded performers of color was fairly accessible to a large portion of the Spanish public.

Race, however, was most profitable, exotic, and titillating when it blended, mixed, and passed white for black and vice-versa, radically destabilizing fixed categories of identity. The English adjective "racy" (the OED gives its early twentieth-century meaning as referring to a "floosie," or "a girl or woman of disreputable character") may have described how some Spaniards felt about stories of the girl seduced into the stageworld, or more generally, about mixed

race couples in films and serial novels. The girls in these stories were "racy" in their open sexuality and their openness towards men of different ethnicities, specifically men of color. They were dangerously naughty—and their stories were hopelessly popular. Narratives about mixed-race couples were certainly not new in Spain. The difference was that in the context of modern entertainment and stardom, "racy" female characters could actually compete with men for wealth and fame.

In 1907, for instance, the company Atracciones Internacionales toured Spain with a Barcelonese singer and dancer who performed American songs in blackface. The girl's name was allegedly Raquel Meller, the famous Spanish *cupletista* and star of several films, including *La Venenosa*. In 1914, the *cupletista* Marianela and a black entertainer named Colbert danced the tango in the Trianon club (Lopez Ruiz 13). We also know that long before Josephine Baker's 1925 debut in Madrid with Louis Douglas's *La Révue Nègre*, certain jazz numbers like the cake walk and rag time, originally sung by African American artists, figured in the repertoires of *cupletistas* and *cancionetistas* of the 1910s and 1920s such as, Esperanza Posada, Julieta Fons ("la reina de la sicalipsis"), and Adelita Lulú ("la reina de las fotos iluminadas"), bringing these performers fame in the entertainment circuits of large Spanish cities. And finally, the fad of "spoiled" females's whims for men of color was made a classic in the popular tango that insinuated itself into the spaces of everyday life in the '20s, "Porque era negro":

Porque era negro/Because he was
black
La engañaba;/he betrayed her;
Porque era negro/because he was
black

Le despreciaba./she disdained him.
 Pobre negrito,/Poor little black
 man
 Muere de amor/he is dying of love
 Por la desdicha de su color/because
 of the misfortune of his color
 ...
 Mamá
 Cómprame un negro/buy me a
 black man
 En el bazar/in the bazaar
 Cómprame un negro
 Que baile el charleston./who dances
 the Charleston.⁶

The Spanish composer credited with bringing the Charleston to Spain, Angel Ortiz de Villajós Cano, composed this song after coming into contact with Afro-American rhythms during his travels in the Americas. Alluding to the African American entertainers who came to Spain to teach these new dances and rhythms, one of the song's most famous versions was sung by the *cupletista*, La Yankee, a.k.a. Reyes Castizo, in the mid-twenties.⁷

El negro que tenía el alma blanca's spectacular impact upon the popular imaginary becomes clearer when we see that its mechanism of attraction—its raciness—was connected to these attendant cultural forms and their pre-existing black and white formulas. *El negro que tenía el alma blanca* comments upon the world of racialized entertainment by displaying blackface on the labels of commodity tie-ins, and in the unselfconscious blackface performance of Raymond de Sarka, the actor playing Peter. Concha Piquer, the famous *cupletista* who plays Emma, on the one hand symbolizes white stardom through the close-ups of her white face, her white glittery clothes, and stage lights, while on the other hand she furthers the chromatic contrast by putting on and removing blackface in one of the

film's most important sequences. Just as she performs raciness by dancing with Peter, but then removes it by rejecting his love (sex), Emma performs blackness but then removes it to begin performing her role as a white star. Those who can choose their color as opposed to Peter's fixed and anti-modern blackness demonstrate the ability to change, become, and pass, and therefore constitute indices of the modern.

Indeed, from the very beginning, *El negro* (1926) foregrounds the performance of blackface while it teaches us the value encoded color scheme needed to "read" the film as well as the axiomatic "star scheme" of good girl-bad girl-good girl.⁸ In the first scene, a tired Don Mucio returns to his poverty-stricken home in working class Madrid. As he enters, he surprises his daughter Emma, who is cleaning the chimney stove. Covered in soot, hair uncombed, and with relaxed, even slovenly bodily gestures—all of which function as a performance of stereotyped blackness—Emma looks up at Don Mucio with bulging eyes and blinks several times, opening them widely to show off the whites of her eyes and crossing them several times. Emma's gestures evoke Manthia Diawara's description of the "deceptively dangerous" color white. When used in black face, white is meant to evoke the rolling eyes of the watermelon and chicken thief surprised in the darkness in "Sambo" art, or the wide-eyed stereotypes of blackness associated with the grimaces of demons, or "imposters trying to usurp the ways and manners of a white lady."⁹ Here, Emma parodies a white lady since she is not yet one herself. But Don Mucio, concerned that his white property might be contaminated by association with blackness, reprimands Emma for not being better groomed, as a future star should take better care of herself. The scene ends with a close-up shot of

Emma's white hands stroking a white cat and then raising it to her face, now whitened with make-up.

Emma's ability to put on and take off blackface foregrounds Peter's inability to change his color. Precisely what had made *The Jazz Singer* potentially contestatory was the self-conscious use of blackface as just another prop that might allow Eddie to pass and identify with another marginalized group like his own. Emma is first presented as black and soiled by the chimney soot on her face, but she will become white, clean, and normatively stable, merely by dressing up and applying white powder. Emma's face is central to the visual narrative as the antonym of Peter's black face, which almost blends into the background in many shots, further underscoring Peter's dilemma: he has a white soul (Emma's face is the reminder of the soul) but as we cannot see his whiteness, it does not exist.¹⁰ Peter thus constitutes the split modern subject struggling to discard the pre-modern ideological cage of "appearance equals truth."

Emma's emergent whiteness is aligned with visual symbols of white superiority and female purity such as the white cat that Emma holds up to her face. In her study of nineteenth-century Spanish illustrated magazines's portrayal of women, Lou Channon Deutsch has exhaustively shown that domesticated animals were a familiar visual trope that evoked the contradictory status of women as precocious and teasing, thus requiring engagement.¹¹ Emma's color and feline traits invoke the popular and "racy" operas, *La gatita negra* and *La gatita blanca* by Vives y Giménez, known for the "desabillés de las tanguistas, cuyo elenco encabezó la propia Julita Fonts, y los temblequenates cake-walk, con los que culminaban/the scantily clad tango dancers, whose cast was led by Julita Fonts herself, and the trembling cake-walks

that topped it off" (García Martínez 19). These overtly sexual features of popular erotic theatre bring us back to the theme of race, the daring taboo of white and black sexual contact which was exciting for audiences of both men and women. Yet Emma's white cat also explicitly references D.W. Griffith's shots of white kittens contrasted with black kittens and puppies in *Birth of a Nation*, where they are visual metaphors for the tension between the genteel white South and the criminalized, lower-class North, which had been further contaminated by its association with former black slaves. Inherent in these examples is the mechanism of desire and rejection, offering a profitable release valve for sexual fantasy, but also instating the white woman's privileged role in reproduction and her hierarchical position above the racialized other, while she herself is subordinated to white male power. Emma is the white angel of the home, moving within a glowing incandescent light à la Lillian Gish, yet simultaneously holding the status of sex symbol through the star text of Concha Piquer. The Spanish film industry will nurture this union in order to compete with Hollywood, but more importantly, to provide Spanish spectators with a star that they can acceptably idolize. Blatant sexuality was impermissible, but Concha Piquer, skimpily veiled by the discourse of virginity, was titillatingly profitable.

El negro's beginning establishes the tension between the requisite grooming that consciously strives for lightness and the coding of glamour and stardom as white, and Emma's ability to mingle and play with blackness, to the shock of her spectating father. The film will build upon this moment in which Don Mucio's anxiously reacts to Emma's apparent and temporary hybridity by continuously offering situations in which blending and mixing dominate the action. Contrasting Emma's moral purity, Don

Mucio is an unsuccessful theatre personality who dreams that his daughter's triumph will rescue them from poverty. In Oliver's play, Don Mucio has fought for Spain in Cuba, has killed blacks, and boasts of his knowledge about Afro-Cubans by citing the perverse racial typologies used to distinguish between Afro-Cuban individuals (25). His prejudices smoothly fit into his capitalist logic and rational notions about money. Representing the slippery slope of modernity's capitalist enlightenment, he sees money and fame as colorless, conveniently ignoring that his contract with Peter includes the sale of his daughter. At the same time, Don Mucio compensates for Spain's pre-modern mindset, racist prejudices, and general backwardness by exuding a "progressive" modernity as he repeatedly reminds his daughter that fame is colored gold, not black or white. In the novel he states:

Pues, hija..., eso es el éxito, que no es congo, ni mandinga, ni cristiano, ni judío, el éxito, que hace olvidar el crimen y la infamia, el éxito, que es... el éxito y tiene siempre el mismo color: ¡el de oro! (96)

Well, daughter... that is success, and it's not congo, mandinga, Christian, nor Jewish; success forgets about crime and infamy; success is success and it always has the same color, that of gold!

Nonetheless, his hypocrisy, impregnated with a watered down eugenics and colonial nostalgia, will continually reinstate the black and white dichotomy of which Peter is the ultimate victim.

Emma and Don Mucio's split subjectivities mirror Peter's own duality. Peter's ambivalent status as both servant and star (ordinary yet extraordinary) and his obses-

sion to reconcile his black skin and white soul, figures the construction of Cuba itself in the Spanish national imaginary. The ideology underpinning Peter's attractive yet threatening character can be partly surmised from Insúa's own socio-political context and his novel from 1922. In his autobiography, *Memorias*, Insúa sees Cuba as black anarchy, yet at the same time, as Spain's brother. These analogies evoke the imperialist rhetoric of *Hispanidad*, a project designed to unite the Hispanic world through Spanish language and culture. This alternative to military colonization was an implicit recognition that while *criollos* (Spaniards born in the Americas) longed to be part of the *Madre Patria*, black America could destroy this union. In *Memorias*, Insúa remarks that Spanish nationalist newspapers portrayed the conflict in Cuba as an encounter of troops against rebels, heroes vs. savages. Projecting his desire he writes that the savages could nevertheless be tamed by white Spaniards:

negros y mulattos, cuya rabia cedía siempre ante el impulso de los infantes y jinetes españoles [blacks and mulattos, whose rage always ceded before the impulse of the Spanish infantrymen and Mounties]. (79-80)¹²

This same fearful condescension reveals itself in Insúa's father's political treatise, *El problema cubano*, that called for Cuba's semi-autonomy rather than its independence. Insúa agreed that Cuba's salvation resided in the continuity of the Spanish spirit, its language, religion and culture presided over by an elite:

[a] los vaticinios de una Cuba negra, de una Cuba esclava, sucedían en el libro de mi padre los cuadros de color

de rosa de una Cuba feliz, gobernada por los mejores de sus hijos en nombre de la Madre Patria. Esto era lo que me gustaba del libro: que Cuba no dejara de ser española. (81)

upon the prophesies of a Black Cuba, of an enslaved Cuba, my father's book followed with rosy portraits of a happy Cuba, governed by the best of her sons in the name of the Madre Patria. That was what I liked about his book: that Cuba did not cease to be Spanish.

Such tacit support of Spanish paternalism and colonization, indeed the inability of Peter to rid himself of his past as a house servant for wealthy *criollos*, nevertheless acknowledges Peter, and by extension Cuba and Africa, as a competitor and at the same time a coveted possession.

Insúa's own conflicted relationship to his character, Peter, perhaps stemmed from his sympathy for Peter's doubleness that was a condition for Blacks, *criollos* and Spaniards alike: the aspiration to be European and modern and the inability to do so. The narrative reveals Peter's mysterious past, the root of his anxiety, as a series of flashbacks, linking him indelibly to his Afro-Cuban origins. This is necessary plot material for the star is born narrative—Peter's humble beginnings parallel Emma's struggle amidst poverty and the degrading theatre life. Yet while Emma longs to preserve her past, Peter endeavors to erase his. The flashbacks signify Peter's inability to repress the circumstances of his birth and his acculturation to Cuban servitude. The flashbacks thus posit History as an organizational trauma that frustrates Peter's attempts to live out the desired narrative of stardom. In the novel, Peter, or Pedro Valdés as he was born, was the son of freed slaves who remained faithful to

their Spanish masters, believing that life was better on the idyllic plantation with their "buenos amos/good masters" (Insúa 122). Pedro was from a family of house servants who were considered an improved stock of Africans, closely associated as they were with the white aristocratic Arencibia family—a "superior race" (123).

Pedro/Peter's relationships to women would play out Peter's internalization of his forbidden aspirations and the fatal flaw of his tragic heroism. Pedro's mother, a mammy type, "Eva negra, Cibeles etíope" (122) simultaneously suckled Pedro and the marquis's daughter, Piedad. Pedro, accustomed to white wealth and comfort, will subsequently acquire a "taste" for white women—first Piedad, then the loose theatre women, and finally the saintly Emma. Peter's tragedy thus resides in his location within, identification with, and desire for white culture incarnated in the white woman (Emma), and his simultaneous status as a melodramatic victim of a racially divided society.

Although Pedro's taste for white women will be repressed, he will rebel from his masters. Reaching adulthood, Pedro realizes that Piedad's rejections of even his brotherly love, and his increasingly threatening presence to the son of the marquis, the perverted and degenerate Nestor (the embodiment of diseased Spain), have prevented his fulfillment of subjectivity. In a revealing moment, Nestor catches Peter playing with his swords and violently punishes him, recalling the realities of slave owners' fears of rebellion by armed and intelligent blacks, and once again, a reflection of how *criollos* felt about their own underclass. Peter's choice is to remain sub-human in the eyes of his paternalistic employers or to leave Cuba and to try to fulfill his dream of becoming white. Peter's black corporeal identity marks

him as the lack, yet his soul—a romantic, not modern concept—and thus spectator identification, are in ideological conflict with this Hegelian bias. Peter is therefore the victim of contesting discourses in an emergent Spain that categorize him as either irremediably black or impossibly altruistic and devoted.

For those who came into direct competition with performers like Peter Wald, fixing Peter's blackness enabled those who desired to occupy the inside of modernity to draw distinct boundaries between themselves and Peter. Peter's blackface in the 1926 film provides a counterpoint to Emma's ability to pass. Residues of the parodic *teatro bufo's* blackface ultimately retreat before ideological discourses of blood purity that had justified centuries of terror in Spain. The motives for choosing the Egyptian actor, Raymond de Sarka, for the role of Peter in Perojo's 1926 film are a case in point. *El negro* is unique in its presentation of not only a "black" character, but also an Egyptian actor in blackface. Spectators knew that Raymond de Sarka was not black. As a French critic noted, because Sarka's skin was white, he had to endure a thick coat of make-up during the shooting; he did not know how to dance, but he was chosen for his "gran emotividad."¹³

Film reviews that remarked upon his ethnic identity were also ambiguous, like the interview in *El Cine* that describes Sarka as the son of a "pacha," but without throne or princship.¹⁴ Others noted his discovery on a beach by the cinema director, Marcel Vandal and his star appearance in three films, *Lady Harrington*, *L'Eau du Nil*, and *La menace*. When Perojo saw Sarka's photo in a magazine, he hired him on the spot as a Valentino figure who would appeal to the growing female cinema audiences. Such industry gossip elevated Sarka to the status of

sex symbol, while his purported aristocracy gained audience support for an admirable character whose love for Emma is rejected, thereby suturing intradiegetic audiences' and characters' desire, as well as extradiegetic spectator desire that might have associated him with Valentino. Indeed, spectator desire for the body of the star is captured by the camera's fetishization of Peter's black face and handsomely dressed figure.¹⁵

Like Peter, Raymond de Sarka's Egyptian identity was overshadowed by his cosmopolitan stardom, so like Peter, his skin must be colored darker and aligned with a colonial identity in which North Africa substitutes for Latin America (Cuba). Sarka's blackface acting is not grossly overdone as it was in early American film of the teens and the twenties, yet his blackness is emphasized by makeup, lighting, frequent use of white gloves, and black and white clothing such as tuxedos. His blackface is neither parodic nor self-conscious, as was the *teatro bufo*. The film subjects Sarka-as-Peter to a politics of color that precludes intermediate skin tones and disciplines ambivalent elements that slip through the cracks of the imperialist machinery. In its allegorical way, Peter's story evokes Spain's history of racial confrontation—the Arab invasion of 711 and the fifteenth-century arrival of the first Rrom—in a way that safely diffuses the feared return of the racialized/ethnic other, and reinforces Spain's imaginary status as emissary rather than receiver.

Peter's rebellion against the Arencibia family and his steamship journey across the Atlantic to become a new man, first in Paris then in Madrid, tells the story of so many other artists of color who came to Europe in the teens and early twenties to occupy stages alongside European performers. Peter's stellar rise in popularity indexes the demand for performers of color and the

Spaniards's simultaneous denigration of entertainment that overshadowed "authentic" Spanish cinema.

Yet while the 1926 film recalled how Spanish and American performers mixed and mingled, it heavily invests in the visibility of the white female Spanish star and much of its dramatic tension lies in the fear that Emma, other theatre personalities, and intra-diegetic spectators feel toward Peter. On one level, Spaniards' anxieties about which groups would benefit from the cultural onslaught of modernity encouraged them to pit ethnicities against one another. With the arrival in Spain of Afro Cuban and African American entertainers such as La Perla Negra, or Josephine Baker, who debuted in Madrid in 1925, white female entertainers and their agents, theaters and film directors felt inadequate because stars like Baker, or the fictional Peter Wald, could request sums of money far beyond those available even to established national stars.¹⁶ Talk about the salaries of entertainers was a constant topic in pulp fiction and journalistic coverage about the popular stage (the novel, *El negro*, being just one example). Benito Perojo, for instance, affirmed in an interview that Piquer made 12,000 pesetas for three months of work in *El negro*, more than any other Spanish actress of the time (Gubern 121). De Sarka's salary was not mentioned. Peter Wald thus symbolizes how color and talent endangered the collective drive to succeed in the capitalist project of Spanish modernity. Emma reinforces white right to economic success and individuality, molding to Spanish audiences' ideal projection of themselves. Wald's ambition and his success in the international entertainment circuit suggest what could (and did) happen if former colonial subjects "invade" the entertainment market. Ultimately,

throughout the story cycle of *El negro* the message is clear: Peter would be better off not to compete with whites.

Peter's triumphant visit to Madrid when he is at the height of his world fame, exacerbates the decrepit state of the Spanish theatre world, a synecdoche for a dilapidated post-1898 Spain. The 1926 film introduces Peter's character on his arrival at the Madrid theatre where Emma works, which bustles with activity as the performers wait anxiously for his entrance, enviously gossiping about his success and wealth. Accompanied by a white chauffeur and his white dance partner, Ginnette, Peter epitomizes cosmopolitan modernity (the mixed race couple, Ginnette's French identity) in conjunction with the American Dream (the Rolls Royce and the "money can buy everything" motto). Set against previous scenes that highlight Emma's poverty and the lumpen theatre conditions, Peter's material extravagance, coupled with the fawning intradiegetic audience of theatre workers, destabilizes the notion of blackness as primitive. The anxiety to achieve modernity is conveyed by shots of the curious theatre girls, who from behind the bars of a descending stairway gape through fetishized close ups of Ginnette's satin and diamond shoes. Precisely who is on display in this scene is ambiguous, both for the curious Spaniards in their "cage" and for Peter, who receives and returns their gaze, complicating any facile reading of the look. Later on, Emma and Don Mucio arrive at Paris' Quai d'Orsay train station and step aboard the electric escalator, an emblem of modernity and the rise to stardom. In a slapstick routine, they fall all over themselves, annoying the Parisiens accustomed to such machines and parodying the *paletos*, the "hick" Spaniards who have never been out of Spain.

The film's encoding of color through contrasts and mixings—introduced usually through strategic close-ups and editing—indexes the tension produced by the various hegemonic interpretations of race, gender, and class. Mixing and shared spaces are intercut between shots of Peter's welcome reception and Emma's humble preparation of coffee and milk. Medium shots showing Peter's servant pouring golden champagne, alternate with takes of Emma mixing the caramel colored *café con leche* for her father. As father and daughter watch the theatre types toasting to Peter's success, Peter turns to Emma and raises his glass. Don Mucio excitedly prepares to toast back with coffee, but Emma hysterically keeps him from speaking, knocking the coffee onto the floor where the disastrous results of racial mixing are visually foretold in a puddle. Peter reciprocates Emma's stare, having marked his superiority with champagne over coffee (a slave crop). He thus catalyzes her trauma and instigates her desperate appeal to her father to protect her from Peter's demonized blackness. She now sees Peter's body as monstrous and savage, deflecting any possible interpretation of her reaction as envy or admiration. As female victim of the black man's lustful gaze, Emma gains a narrative centrality in the stardom story, thereby upstaging Peter's exuberant and transgressive entrance into the theatre.

Emma's hysteria, a product of her split subjectivity, is apparently caused by the repression of her desire and the attraction of Peter's victim status. For Peter is indeed an object of desire: talented, handsome, and good, he plays a star who is better than the other characters can sometimes admit. This push and pull of identity and difference was surely experienced by Spanish spectators. Riveted by performers like Peter Wald, they

were led to think about their own modernness or anti-modernness, and to project their longing/loathing onto the racialized performer.

As the narrative progresses, Emma and Peter's dance routine becomes an international hit; intradiegetic audiences flock to see this "racy" couple, and they become icons of a sort. A point/of/view shot shows a female spectator with opera glasses watching Emma and Peter's Charleston and Tango routine, suturing intra- and extra-diegetic audience desire for both Concha Piquer-as-Emma and the Valentino-like Peter. Playing to the sensibility of audiences, Peter and Emma's trance-like dance on stage fuels the public's desire to witness their taboo interracial coupling, briefly overriding a fear-induced tension. As the novel describes it:

[c]iertos pasos, ciertos contoneos y contorsiones eran francamente lúbricos y tendían a evocar imágenes de la intimidad amorosa [...]. (251)

[certain steps, certain swaying of the hips and contortions were frankly lubricous and tended to evoke images of sexual intimacy].

However, temporary excess is reigned in by scientific discourse. In Federico Oliver's theatrical adaptation, Peter's monstrosity is similar to the spider's fascinating yet terrifying excess: Describing his dancing with Emma, Oliver writes:

Peter advierte la repugnancia inevitable de Emma y procura [...] lo mismo que los insectos fascinadores, anestesiar a su víctima. Quiere envolverla en una tupida malla de atenciones, cuidados, y desvelos. (59)

Peter notices Emma's invincible repugnance and procures the same as fascinating insects, to anaesthetize his victim. He wants to wrap her in a thick web of attentions and devotions]"

Later making the analogy, "[f]igurate un hipopótamo que quiere ser cisne/imagine a hippopotamus that wants to be a swan." This anthropological obsession with hybridity manifested itself as "an abhorrence of interracial intercourse and 'blood-mixing'" (Tobing Rony 162), and the belief that such mixture produced monsters (163). Furthermore, cannibalistic imagery actually displaced responsibility for obscene consumption from the white spectator onto the racialized subject.

The tension climaxes in an oneiric sequence where Emma imagines Peter as a cannibalistic gorilla and then a savage who abducts her. White paranoia controls the narrative, as anxious looks reveal taboo desire and its reminder of incompleteness and lack that plagues the illusion of white subjecthood. Fanon's interpretation of the white woman's fear of the black man as a fantasy of rape (63-82) is thus evoked by Emma's unconscious, or shall we say, guilty conscience.

Contemporary historians have considered this oneiric section of the film the most important, labeling it vanguard and surreal for its evocation of the complex world of the libido.¹⁷ Relevant here is Clyde Taylor's comparison of productions celebrated for their technical achievements and "national allegories, such as *Birth of a Nation*, in which the definition of national character simultaneously involves a co-defining anti-type" (15). Critics focus on Segundo de Chomón, an early *auteur* Spanish filmmaker and inventor of many special effects (Sánchez

Vidal 227), who devised this sequence's photographic tricks, corroborating Taylor's argument that emphasis on pioneer figures of national cinemas and their emblematic creations tends to conceal racist national ideologies. For the most technically daring as well as shockingly racist scene of *El negro* occurs during Emma's nightmare, provoked by Peter's return of her gaze.

As the title card informs us, "That night, Emma is chased by the piercing gaze of the black man." Distracted by the poster calendar in her room, which flaunts a racist advertisement for cigarette papers, *Papel du fumer Bambu*, Emma turns it around so as not to have to "face" the image and its gaze. Diawara's comments on the blackface stereotype are again appropriate:

[t]he stereotyped red lips, white eyes, and white teeth both emphasize its deformity and monstrosity [...] the head is much smaller by analogy to the large face [...] while the top hat and bow-tie signify modernity, the red lips symbolize cannibalism [...].

In a series of transition shots, the blackface on the calendar fades into a close up of Peter's distorted face, made globular and balloon-like by a concave lens, and finally into a shot of a set depicting the head of a gorilla with an enormously large fanged mouth, out of which an imaginary black native, naked except for a grass skirt, jumps out into Emma's bedroom. In slow motion, the camera "captures" him leaping around the room with springing and crouching gestures in a style reminiscent of ethnographic documentaries. Fatimah Tobing Rony argues that cinema has been the site of intersections between anthropology, popular culture, and the constructions of nation and

empire. (9) The cinematic “ethnography” in this sequence is then understandable, given that ethnographic films of this period projected Africans or dark-skinned others as exotic specimens of an earlier evolutionary stage, without history, writing, civilization, or technology. Thus it is that Peter pulls Emma out of bed and then heaves her into the gaping gorilla mouth where tribal figures orgiastically dance around a fire. Peter, dressed as the king of the “savages,” kisses her squarely on the mouth and the sequence ends when Emma wakes up screaming while her father rushes to comfort her.

Visual references to advertisements in and outside of the film—cigarette papers, the film poster, product labels—forge a connection between the commodified black body and the ideological optics of race and science that permeate Emma’s eroticized fears, e.g. those given shape by the anthropological trope of naked savages “as the link between the ape and the white man” (Tobing Rony 162). In Insúa’s novel, Emma exclaims, “Ay papá, no puedes figurarte...! Era un mono, muy grande, como el del Anís...Ay papaíto! Ay papá!” (98). What comes to mind is Fanon’s famous case reference of the boy who becomes fearful upon seeing the black man, and so appeals to the mother: “Look at the nigger!...Mama, a Negro!...[...].” (113).

In the film, the relationship between consumerism and scientific racism is made explicit by the monkey icon on the labels of an actual brand of Spanish anis, *Anís del mono*. Reproduced in the film’s publicity posters, with an unusual similarity to the as yet unmade King Kong (1933), this recognizable artifact connects the consumption of alcohol with sexual fantasies involving racialized others. As Sánchez Vidal points out, canvas paintings by Picasso and Juan Gris had glossed this image of the gorilla, deep-

ening its effect on the national imaginary (227). Similarly, *Papel du fumer Bambu*, the calendar-advertisement for cigarette papers featuring a Sambo face, mimics the strategy used to sell “Gitane” cigarettes by linking phallic cigarettes to a racialized, exoticized female icon and the white man or woman who will smoke them.¹⁸ The actual promotion of smoking accoutrements, alcohol, and beauty products—luxury items for the majority of Spaniards—borrowed cosmopolitan aesthetics (vampy, sleek art deco looks) but often added racialized others to suggest an exotic escape from mundane industrialized life. Most Spanish spectators in the twenties found these fetishized commodities unaffordable. Nevertheless, such product placement “trained” spectators to aspire to middle-class materiality, even if such aspirations would only be fulfilled three decades later.

Eventually, the possibility of hybridity, the root of Emma’s antagonism, reappears in an asexual and spiritual register. The novel refers to Peter’s dancing with Emma as disinterested: “lejos de encanallar y bestializar los bailes modernos, los espiritualizaban [far from degrading and bestializing the modern dances, they spiritualized them]” (251). The couple’s dynamic is an expression of platonic love, thus dispelling the excitement for a scenario in which Peter ascends, or descends, into enlightened white subjecthood and death. In step with Fanon’s “the somatic nervousness of the colonized,” Peter deteriorates to a mere specter of his former self. The title card assures the audience that Peter’s soul is now as white as snow, permitting Emma to declare her love and kiss Peter. But just before they kiss, Emma sees Peter’s white servant observing the scene from behind a door; so she kisses Peter’s forehead instead of his lips. The climactic moment of forbidden desire is denied by the intrusion

of a third element with whom the spectator identifies. This third party absorbs the surplus of the moment, that is, the unorthodox pleasure framed in the mis-en-scène of Peter and Emma's embrace, and provokes Emma to recognize her fear of difference. Emma cannot face the face of the other because that would require commitment, complicity and identification with the other.

Inherent in Peter's ironic trajectory toward the sublime, his desire to transcend materiality, is the uncomfortable awareness that overcoming the body, even the racially marked body, leaves one with nothing. To prevent disappearing into nothingness, one must retain the body, but this means incorporating the racialized body into the social body. Emma's identification with Peter implies her willingness to overcome the body's passions, to pursue to infinite heights a disembodied courtly love. But like the creation of cinematic film, without the exposure of the celluloid that produces a black mark on an otherwise clear film, there is only whiteness, which is nothingness.

El negro que tenía el alma blanca imagines who gets to perform and embody whiteness. *El negro* interlocks contradictory modes of representation relying on eighteenth-century natural science and nineteenth-century classification of difference with new and daring interpretations of racial difference, sex, and gender roles that infiltrated 1920s Spain under the labels of Négritude, The New Woman, and Cosmopolitanism. The film captures the meeting of science and spectacle within a melodramatic, crowd-pleasing narrative. By incorporating foreign and racialized cosmopolitan entertainment discourses into an idiom that would make sense for Spanish audiences, *El negro* plunged Spain's

racial and colonial history into a modernity symbolized by the stardom narrative. In this collision, racialized bodies provided the contrast that affirmed the bourgeois self as non-racialized, while racial codes and exclusionary cultural principles marked out those who were worthy of property, citizenship and dominant subjecthood, thereby mapping the national community along racial criteria.¹⁹ In this sense, the film's symbolic death of the black entertainer unwittingly secures a safe route for the progressive whitening and nationalizing of Spanish stardom and its fabrication of subjectivity.

Notes

¹ Ben Harper, the popular American jazz musician was interviewed in *El País* before performing in Madrid. He was lauded as "Cantautor negro, corazón blanco." (*El País* 28 de mayo de 2004) This saying still has surprising caché.

² Robert C. Allen points out that images and films on the Spanish American War were instrumental in reviving the American motion picture industry from its pre-nickelodeon era status as a passing fad and shaping it into the global monopoly it continues to be (139).

³ Kobena Mercer's reaction to Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of nude men of color refers to this same tension between fear and desire and could be extended to this film. Franz Fanon asserts that sexual stereotypes born of white fear of blacks necessarily recreate the black man as an "epidermalized" locus of fear.

⁴ Gubern 136-37; *Cinemagazine*, 26. 28 July 1929: 549.

⁵

Cuando un actor blanco quiere absorber la atención del público, se pinta de negro, Al Johnson. La gran carcajada del norteamericano—una carcajada desgarrada, violenta, casi ibérica—es arrancada siempre por el actor negro. (*Cuadernos Lorca*: 2: "Charlas sobre el teatro": 31)

⁶ (Gubern 127), my translation.

⁷ <<http://www.adraenlinea.com/personajes/Ortiz/ortiz.htm>>.

⁸ My gratitude to you, Andrew Bush.

⁹ “The Blackface Stereotype.” <Blackculturalstudies.org/m_diawara/blackface.html>.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note Louis Armstrong’s “Black and Blue” “[...] They laugh at you...and all that you do/What did I do...to be so black and blue/I’m white...inside...but, that don’t help my case/That’s life...can’t hide...what is in my face [...]. My only sin...is in my skin/What did I do...to be so black and blue.”

¹¹ See Charnon Deutsch 1999 and 2002.

¹² In *Memorias*, Waldo, Insúa’s brother—similar in name to Peter Wald—was ironically the one to punish black servants for referring to separatism: “Una de las criadas, la negrita Salomé, se atrevió una tarde a tararear la réplica que la plebe separatista daba a la famosa canción.

Chupa la uva
Suelta la caña,
Coge la maleta
Y vete pa España!

Y lo que cogió Waldo fué una escoba y la emprendió a palos con la negrita” (133).

¹³ *Cinémagazine* 26 (28 June 1937) (qtd. in Gubern 137)

¹⁴ Ricci, Alejandro. “El Peter Wald que yo conocí.” *El Imparcial* (17 November 1927): 814.

¹⁵ It is interesting to juxtapose this Hispanic Valentino model with the female star, who would surpass the male star in importance in the popular musical films. Indeed, among the few male sex-symbols who would sing or be fetishized in the coming decades, only Angelillo, until his exile, and the Mexican Jorge Negrete, would be able to counter the effeminate male singer stereotype.

¹⁶ Cuban song, icons and fantasies filled Spanish popular entertainment, galvanizing the connection between early jazz, *négritude* and Cuba. Spaniards bought Josephine Baker’s *Cancionero Popular* with rumbas and Cuban songs. As Amorós describes it,

para los españoles, suponía esto el atractivo de descubrir otro mundo: en la letra, en la música en la danza, en el espectáculo...La nota inicial

del *Cancionero* de la Baker subraya que se trata de un ‘Nuevo descubrimiento de América o la conquista de Europa’. (165)

Early jazz and the emergence of *négritude* were indebted to Cuban rumbas such as the habanera, the colombiana and the tango, all massively popular during the interwar period. Female performers of color were mainly from Cuba, like María la cubana, Lola Montiel, Mercedes Blanco, Perla Etíope, Herminia La Negrita, and Rumba Chamelona. Cuba’s irruption onto the Spanish entertainment scene occurred with sensuality and exotica: “‘La rumba’, danza lánguida, malsana y voluptuosa” que en su encarnación primigenia como chuchumbé condenó el Santo Oficio por contravenir a las buenas costumbres y corromper a las doncellas (García Martínez 20).

¹⁷ See Sánchez Vidal and Gubern.

¹⁸ The Arab body had also been previously commodified. See Eloy Martín Corrales.

¹⁹ Ann Laura Stoler reminds us how,

[t]he discursive and practical field upon which bourgeois [subjectivity] emerged was situated on an imperial landscape where the cultural accoutrements of bourgeois distinction were partially shaped through contrasts forged in the politics and language of race (5).

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