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Keywords

Mayra Santos-Febres, slave narrative, Puerto Rico, slavery, Atlantic Slave Trade, Caribbean, gender

Disciplines

History | History of Gender | Latin American History | Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature | Spanish Literature

**Writing Words, Wearing Wounds:
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This article analyzes Mayra Santos-Febres's novel "Fe en disfraz" as a modern subversive slave narrative that inverts racial and gender hierarchies and critiques contemporary Caribbean white male privilege. The analysis answers the following questions: How does the novel represent the racialized and sexualized female body? How does the novel's representation of racial and gender relations address the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade in the Caribbean? And ultimately, what does the novel suggest about (re-) writing the personal and the collective history of slavery?

Since the 1970s, Puerto Rican women writers have created some of the most innovative literary work, in terms of the themes that they approach, the problems that they critique and the possibilities that they imagine for female empowerment, agency and equality. Authors like Ana Lydia Vega, Carmen Lugo Filippi and Magali García Ramis paved the way for the discussion, from a feminist standpoint, of the intersections of gender and sexuality with issues of class, race, colonialism, language and migration. In the past two decades, a new generation of female writers has emerged, which has proposed a critical look at the relationship between gender, sexuality, race, and the history of slavery. Novelists, short-story writers and poets like Mayra Santos-Febres, Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro and Yara Liceaga have examined the ways in which this relationship is embodied by young Afro-Caribbean women. Their characters often embrace race, gender and sexuality as markers of difference and use them to create strategies of resistance to neo-colonial and patriarchal structures of oppression.

By constructing characters whose lives are intertwined with the history of slavery and are marked by both patriarchal and neo-colonial hierarchies, these authors contribute to the production of a body of work that scholars of African-American and Anglophone Caribbean literature have called "neo-slave narratives." According to Ashraf Rushdy, who coined the term in his 1999 book *Neo-Slave Narratives: Study in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, neo-slave narratives are "one particular form of the contemporary narrativity of slavery [...], that is, contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (Rushdy 3). These accounts emerged from a particular historical and cultural moment in the 1960s, marked by the rise of the Black Power movement and of the New Left social history. More broadly, they "[replicate] the acts of the fugitive slaves who had originally written slave narratives in order to assert the authority of their experience" (Rushdy 6), thus re-legitimizing that experience. They also evoked voices that had been absent from the antebellum slave accounts, as "the authors of the Neo-slave narratives were able to make a critical comment about the historiographical tradition whose often romanticized representation of slavery was enabled by the

exclusion of first-hand African American perspectives” (Rushdy 6). Instead of simply revising the master narratives, these texts “form another kind of ‘tradition’ – one emerging from a matrix of literary discontinuities” (Rushdy 16). In this sense, neo-slave narratives don’t necessarily insert themselves into the tradition of a literary form, but rather enable the construction of multiple critical positions from which to approach the experience of slavery, its historical manifestations and contemporary effects.

An aspect of the process of defining the neo-slave narrative tradition has been the critical discussion of the neo-slave narratives produced by women. As Giuliano Bettanin explains, “During and after the 1960s, interest in slave narratives increased, and the feminist movement played an important role in the recovery of a series of slave narratives written by women, texts which broaden the slaves’ perspective on the antebellum society” (Bettanin xv). Rushdy goes even further to emphasize that, while actively engaging themselves with the political and cultural principles of the 1960s movements, black female authors¹ in particular responded critically to their association with masculinity and to their patriarchal discourse, and produced narratives centered on the women’s experience of slavery and its contemporary legacies.

This paper engages the concept of neo-slave narrative in the study of the recent literature produced by Puerto Rican women authors. It analyzes Puerto Rican author Mayra Santos-Febres’s novel *Fe en disfraz* (*Faith in a Costume*, or *Faith in Disguise*), as a modern subversive slave narrative that inverts racial and gender hierarchies. By doing so, the novel proposes a rereading of the history of slavery and critiques contemporary Caribbean white male privilege that the author traces back to the Atlantic slave trade. The questions that guide my analysis are: How does the novel represent the racialized and sexualized female body? How does the novel’s representation of racial and gender relations address the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade in the Caribbean? And ultimately, what does the novel suggest about (re-) writing the personal and the collective history and memory of slavery?

Fe en disfraz as a Neo-slave narrative

Set between the 18th-century Caribbean and 21st-century Chicago, the novel focuses on the character of Fe, a female Afro-Venezuelan historian who recovers and revalorizes the narratives of female African slaves by curating exhibits in a prestigious US museum. During one of her research trips Fe discovers a dress that belonged to Xica da Silva, a freed slave who became one of the most powerful figures in 18th-century Brazil. By wearing the dress, and by subjecting herself to the physical pain that the harnesses inflict on her body, Fe intersects her personal experience of violence with the history of the female slaves that she studies. As she does that, she gradually begins to rethink her own position as an Afro-Caribbean intellectual and historian of slavery.

The narrative is interspersed with the testimonials of physical and sexual abuse of female slaves, brief accounts based on real cases that Santos-Febres accessed through primary and secondary-source research.

Fe’s story is told partly through the eyes of Martín Tirado, a Puerto Rican specialist in digital archival conservation, who works in the same museum. He becomes Fe’s lover and the second medium through which she rebuilds her personal bridge to the past. Martín’s erotic fantasies, focused as much on Fe as on the stories of the abused

¹ Both male and female authors wrote what Rushdy considers neo-slave narratives. He identifies Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976), Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986), Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage* (1990) among the works that founded the genre.

slaves, represent a poignant critique of the permanence of white male privilege in Puerto Rico, and more broadly in Caribbean and diasporic communities.

At first glance, Fe exemplifies aspects of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, a political and cultural hybrid consciousness, defined, as he notes, "through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (Gilroy 19). The Atlantic world, according to Gilroy, is a perfect matrix for the formation of these new, hybrid, intersected and multilayered identities, as it is there that "movement, relocation, displacement and restlessness are the norms rather than the exceptions" (Gilroy 133). Similarly, critics like Margaret Shrimpton have noted that the Caribbean is one of the spaces that exemplify this consciousness, by virtue of its variety, fragmentarity and interconnectedness:

Las migraciones, los viajes y el exilio han sido siempre experiencias vitales para los pueblos caribeños, marcando de manera particular su formación como sociedades, y plasmando una variedad de identidades traslapadas que conforman el espacio del Caribe, es decir, la experiencia cotidiana de ser uno y muchos, de vivir identidades traslapadas y simultáneas (Shrimpton 154).

According to Shrimpton, the transnational condition, the deconstruction of the nation and the interconnectedness of the Caribbean identities, constantly reimagined on the verge of "all that is unstable, negotiated and contradictory between space and the subject"² (Shrimpton 155) are among the fundamental topics of Santos-Febres's work. Similarly, Nadia Celís has argued that Santos-Febres's narrative exemplifies a particular type of Caribbean identity and consciousness, defined in part by what Santos-Febres herself calls a translocal condition (Celís 133), which engenders the multiple varieties and levels of violence that have spurred experiences of migration and diaspora across the Caribbean. I would argue that the representation of such experiences has resulted in Santos-Febres's construction of an expanded notion of the Caribbean that inscribes it into the Black Atlantic and that takes even further Gilroy's discussion of the role of gender in that concept.

Fe (the novel's protagonist) is a product of the history of slavery and simultaneously an intellectual who is an agent of the construction and the representation of this history in and for a Western intellectual context. Born in Caracas and raised in Maracaibo, in the coastal Caribbean region of Venezuela, Fe goes to "un colegio para internas" (87), a type of boarding school for girls supervised by nuns. Her grandmother sends her there, half-expecting, half-fearing that Fe might follow her mother's destiny – getting pregnant and having to marry a distant cousin to save the family's honor. In her childhood fantasies Fe dreams of becoming a nun or a princess, but at the same time she is aware that she doesn't belong, that she will never be part of these worlds:

En mi fuero interno, sabía que aquello no era para mí. Me lo recordaban las alumnas del colegio y el color de mi piel. Mi piel era el mapa de mis ancestros. Todos desnudos, sin blasones ni banderas que los identificaran; marcados por el olvido o, apenas, por cicatrices tribales,

² All translations are mine.

cadena y por las huellas del carimbo sobre el lomo. Ninguna tela que me cubriera, ni sacra ni profana, podría ocultar mi verdadera naturaleza (Santos-Febres 89).

What is interesting in this description is that Fe does not simply identify herself as Venezuelan or black – she says that her ancestors had no flags to identify them, referring not only to colonialism or to the social organization of African societies in the 15th Century, but also to the treatment of slaves as chattel, not as human beings, in the Americas. Instead, Fe inscribes herself in a series of historical times and spaces -- Africa before and in the early stages of the Atlantic slave trade (the tribal scars that she mentions), the Middle Passage (the chains) and the slave plantations, invoked by the image of the carimbó, a type of drum and dance with African and indigenous influences. Fe says that her skin is the map, a type of canvass on which these times and spaces are inscribed, or what Gilroy, following Bakhtin's definition, would call a chronotope that carries both the spatial and the temporal cultural processes and tensions at play.

It is this same marginalized body that carries the times and spaces of the violence of the Atlantic history, that later enters a prestigious research and conservation institution at the University of Chicago, and puts together the first exhibit on manumitted slave women of the 17th and 18th centuries. Martín Tirado, the digital conservationist that later becomes Fe's lover, acknowledges that,

No abundan mujeres como Fe en esta disciplina; mujeres preparadas en Florencia, en México; con internados en el museo de Historia Natural o en el Instituto Schomburg en Nueva York. No son muchas las estrellas académicas con su preparación y que, como Fe, sean, a su vez, mujeres negras (Santos-Febres 16-17).

Fe has understood, in Gilroy's words, "the affinities and affiliations which link the blacks of the West to one of their adoptive, parental cultures: the intellectual heritage of the West since the Enlightenment" (Gilroy 2). But she has also inserted herself into it and has, in a sense, made it hers. On the other hand, as Chrissy Arce has argued, Fe's success also denotes the complexity of her integration into the system of knowledge that controls our understanding of the past:

El estatus de Fe como mujer y negra no sólo señala el éxito de la mujer, sino que pone de relieve su apropiación por se mismo sistema que controla nuestro conocimiento del pasado, las interpretaciones del presente, y las expectativas para el futuro" (Arce 226).

As one of the leading scholars in her field, Fe contributes to the production of a type of knowledge that has represented enslaved women in problematic ways. At the same time, *even as* one of the leading scholars in her field, her blackness still stands out and causes marvel in the eyes of her white male colleagues. Once again, blackness is not a mere reference to race or ethnicity, but rather to the history of domination, oppression and enslavement that the white male gaze recognizes and legitimizes upon directing itself to the protagonist.

It is Fe's research that brings her in contact with the dress once worn by Xica da Silva,³ which she uses to establish a personal, historical and ethical connection with the subjects of her investigation, her ancestors. The warning to not put on the dress comes too late, and Fe wears it in spite of – or rather because of – the pain that the harnesses inflict on her. By wearing the dress, and by engendering quite literally Gilroy's idea of "being in pain" – bleeding onto the dress on which the body of Xica da Silva had bled before her – Fe comes in contact with the suffering of the slave women whose testimonials she finds, preserves and makes visible in her exhibits. By repeating the words "Si pudiera salir de aquí", Fe seemingly alludes at once to the dress and to the pain that it causes her, or, at a deeper level, to her desire to leave the present time, space and body in order to "become" one of her enslaved ancestors. The strategic interjection of "Si pudiera salir de aquí [...] Salir de este cuerpo" (Santos-Febres 114) in the novel's final chapter suggests that it might not be Fe who's speaking, that her voice and her words might be those of the women who had suffered the abuses of slavery, and whose ancestral, cultural and historical pain Fe carries. These are the words of the abused slave woman with whom Fe now identifies. Through this identification Fe gradually constructs a consciousness that is both individual and part of the collective memory of Atlantic slavery. Her experience of building this consciousness culminates in the creation of her personal testimony, similar in style and structure to those of the slave women. Consequently, this chapter also directly identifies Fe's story with the genre of neo-slave narratives, positioning her character in parallel to the women whose testimonials she studies, and against the voice of Martín, who embodies the white male privilege as it is seen as another legacy of the experience of slavery.

Neo-Slave Narratives and Gender in the Black Atlantic

As the novel progresses, Fe begins to move beyond the basic tenets of Gilroy's model of Black Atlantic consciousness, not necessarily challenging them, but rather centering exclusively on the relationship between memory, identity and gender that Gilroy discusses in several chapters. Fe uses the dress as a bridge to her racial and gender identity, she employs words to (re-) write her personal and family history, and fashions her relationship with Martín to invert, physically and symbolically, the gender and racial hierarchies of power revealed through the slave narratives. In this way, she becomes a model of black feminine agency that intersects personal and historical empathy with the recuperation of the memory of slavery.

The sources of Fe's research, which allow her to establish a connection to the past, are court records and testimonials of slave women subjected to physical and sexual violence, women who were seeking justice and who rarely received it. The women are identified by name – Diamantina, María, Petrona, Ana María and Pascuala – and the novel devotes separate chapters to each one, describing in detail the abuse that they have suffered, including beatings, sexual violence and verbal humiliation. In an example of a first-person account found in the testimonial narratives, Ana María recounts the

³ Xica da Silva, or Francisca da Silva de Oliveira, was a freed slave in 18th century Brazil. She acquired wealth and power and became a legendary character, whose life has been represented in multiple works of literature, television and cinema. Arguably, the most famous representation of Xica da Silva is Carlos Diegues's eponymous 1976 film, in which she "becomes the 'power behind the throne' and a dominant force in the politics and fashion of the region" (Stam 291). It is to this image of the intersection of slave exploitation and female power that Santos-Febres alludes in her representation of the dress and of Fe's appropriation of it.

way in which “García me volvió a golpear, pero esta vez, tomó un zapato de mujer y, con el tacón, me dio muchos golpes en la cabeza y me hirió en varias partes, mientras mi ama, Doña Manuela, miraba y se reía” (Santos-Febres 49). The novel thus leaves a record of an experience that had been silenced, and of a type of violence that had remained unpunished. The women’s wounds are similar to those on Fe’s body, and their words become Fe’s inspiration for writing her own story. In this sense, Fe finds redemption for the female slaves’ invisibility through her archival work, through the exhibitions that she prepares and through her continuous quest for knowledge and recognition of their experiences. In this sense, the testimonials also align the text with the neo-slave narrative tradition, by making “a critical comment about the historiographical tradition whose often romanticized representation of slavery was enabled by the exclusion of first-hand African American perspectives” (Rushdy 6).

By identifying the protagonist with the voices of the women that she discovers in the testimonials, Mayra Santos Febres yet again “subverts the ideological institution of the traditional family unit that has functioned as national trope for puertorriqueñidad” (del Río Gabiola 78). While the novel problematizes the applicability of the concept of *la gran familia puertorriqueña* with the use of a Venezuelan protagonist, it unequivocally presents national identity as a “gendered discourse” in which “nations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space” (McClintock 63) across continents and cultures. In *Fe en disfraz*, the representation of the family is in direct opposition to the idealized image of the national model. This is in part due to Fe’s personal and family history – the father, the traditional patriarch, is notably absent from Fe’s upbringing. In addition, as an Afro-Caribbean diasporic woman working in a US cultural institution, Fe is subjected to multiple levels of belonging and otherness. As Jossianna Arroyo has argued regarding migration and diaspora,

En la literatura puertorriqueña el viaje se ha escrito, desde sus inicios, como una narrativa familiar. Los ‘que se van’ siguen siendo, aún hoy, un lugar de inclusiones y exclusiones en el imaginario nacional y cultural puertorriqueño. En ese sentido, estas historias parten de una crisis – subjetiva, política, cultural – en la que aquel (o aquellos) que se van se sitúan ‘fuera’ del orden familiar para construirse en un ‘nuevo orden’ familiar (Arroyo 362).

In Fe’s case, this new familial order is built on a sisterhood, on spiritual and ethical connections to the women whose lives are depicted in the testimonials.

The court records and testimonials play yet another role in the novel. Fe sends the documents to Martín to prepare presentations and proposals, and he immediately begins to find excitement and pleasure in reading about the women’s abuse. Without a doubt among the most disturbing scenes of the novel, these descriptions are not used gratuitously. Through them, the novel positions Martín as the carrier of white male privilege, of unrestricted access and ability to look at, to mold and to interpret the black feminine experience of subjugation. He becomes a contemporary example of what Arce calls “the complicity of those who study the past to recover history and the indelible trace of rape as part of the sexualization of the black female body” (Arce 226). What Arce criticizes in this quote is the complicity of historical research with the objectification and the abuse of black sexuality. Instead of inviting the readers to

identify with Martín's privileged position through his point of view, the ultimate effect of these scenes is twofold. On the one hand, it forces that identification on the readers and puts them in the uncomfortable position of having to question their own relationship to the memory and the representation of slavery. On the other, it questions Fe's own internalization of the gender and racial hierarchies of slavery, and the extent to which her relationship with Martín reproduces them. Consequently, through the characters of Fe and Martín the novel critiques the possibility of academic complicity with the sexualization of the abused black female body.

The novel's subverts the intersection of the racial and gender hierarchies of slavery by inverting the power relations between the two main characters. Early in the novel Martín appears to be attracted to Fe but exhibits a traditional patriarchal view of her as a black woman – wild, seductive, mystical and instinctive. Concerned, he says that “algo extraño me estaba pasando, algo extraño y peligroso que implicaba a Fe Verdejo, la jefa del seminario” (34). He claims to be overpowered by this “algo” that seems incomprehensible, from another world. Fe is also referred to as “la jefa del seminario,” the boss of the overall research institution and not the white male narrator's boss. The only instances in which he acknowledges her as such are when he denies responsibility for the affair and when he worries about the possibility of sexual harassment charges if the affair were to be revealed:

Fe me atraía y me intimidaba. Su prestigio como jefa de división y museógrafa se me presentaba como reto, como un ‘detente’ en el camino; también, como un señuelo. Ella era mi jefa. Era una mujer negra. Ambos éramos [...] contratados por una Universidad paladina de los derechos civiles, de las leyes contra el hostigamiento sexual. No quería que se me fuera a malinterpretar (Santos-Febres 34).

The references to both civil rights and sexual harassment draw attention to race and gender, and evoke the long history of abuse that women like Fe have suffered in the workplace. Yet again, Martín uses those references not to call for justice but as a warning, as something that *he* must keep in mind if he wants to continue the affair with his supervisor without the threat of ethical or legal repercussions. Once again, his words juxtapose his own assumed reason against her unreason, and represent an attempt to reproduce the gender and racial hierarchies of slavery that Fe has managed to invert.

As the novel progresses, the relations of power begin to change, and so do the functions of each character in the construction of the memory of slavery and of Gilroy's Black Atlantic in the present. Early on it becomes clear that Fe is the one who initiates the relationship. The novel opens with a scene in which Martín is preparing for a night with her according to very specific instructions that she has sent: “Las indicaciones de Fe son claras y hay que seguirlas al pie de la letra. Son sus condiciones para nuestro encuentro. Esta vez, me han llegado escuetas, precisas” (Santos-Febres 15). In this way, she claims her own agency by establishing the terms of the relationship, through her “talent to transform bodies and her ability to manipulate desires” (Montes Cáceres 199). Controlling the terms of the relationship is only the first way in which Fe inverts the traditional power hierarchy rooted in slavery and associated with male whiteness and female blackness.

The other way in which Fe challenges both gender and racial hierarchies is through her objective for initiating the affair in the first place. Because the narrative voice is that of the subjected male, Fe's goals are never made explicit. However, her repeated insistence on wearing the dress and her meticulous instructions to Martín about the erotic and the violent part of his "role" in the performance, represent an inverted gender and racial hierarchy. Fe uses orders, making Martín kneel, kiss her or take off her shoes, and even tells him how to hurt her with the dress's harnesses. As a researcher, she is the one who possesses the material object and the historical knowledge to direct Martín, who becomes an instrument in her quest to establish a connection to past times and places. She repositions white male privilege, ridiculing it and using the male body to experience the ethical connection that she seeks. As Nadia Celís has argued, Santos-Febres's characters often use desire "as a force and counterforce that shapes the Caribbean and connects it with the rest of the world" (Celís, "Heterotopías" 134). Here, it is the control of white male desire that subverts the relations of power traditionally associated with the system of slavery, and that allows for the possibility of emancipation and for the construction of a different kind of identity, history and memory.

The way in which this relationship inverts gender and racial hierarchies becomes even clearer in the way in which it mutilates, transforms and even erases the male character. Immediately before one of the sexual encounters, Martín says, "no fui yo, lo juro, quien se levantó de la mesa del puesto donde almorzábamos tomando a Fe de la mano, conduciéndola al estacionamiento. Ni fui quien entró en el carro, quién guió a un lugar apartado" (Santos-Febres 75). Earlier, he reluctantly identifies himself as "Martín Tirado, historiador, quien intentó descifrar, cada vez con menos éxito, los signos de esta historia de la cual quiero dejar constancia[...] Mi historia quedará como testimonio, por si acaso no regreso de esta Vispera de Todos los Santos" (Santos-Febres 14). The book's critical potential, then, is contained precisely in Martín's self-denial and the recognition of his own failure, culminating in his desperate attempt to leave a testimonial of his relationship with Fe. This gesture contains an admission of powerlessness and represents precisely this destabilization and the inversion of the gender and racial hierarchies that, as Gilroy has demonstrated, are part of the Black Atlantic consciousness.

Conclusion

In *Fe en disfraz* Mayra Santos-Febres recovers the history of the objectification, the sexualization, and the abuse of the black female body during the colonial period, and proposes a contemporary re-reading of it. Characterized by what Paul Gilroy has termed a Black Atlantic, hybrid, or double consciousness, Fe's personal narrative approximates the novel to the Neo-slave narrative form and serves as a poignant critique of the contemporary legacy of the racial and gender hierarchies embedded in the very foundations of slavery. Through her relationship with Martín, Fe inverts and re-signifies these hierarchies, ultimately establishing an ethical connection to the past that is both personal and collective, and envisioning ways to use that connection as a tool of feminine liberation, agency and empowerment.

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