"Strand-ed": Interrogating the Shame of the Afro-Latina Female Body in Elizabeth Acevedo's "Afro-Latina" and "Hair"

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Elizabeth Acevedo steps up to the microphone with her head bowed to the floor, a crown of black curls cascading over her bare shoulders. She lifts her gaze to the crowd off-camera, and with her palms open in the air she begins: "My mother tells me to 'fix' my hair. / And by fix, she means straighten, whiten, / but how do you fix this shipwrecked history of hair? / The true meaning of / Strand-ed" (Acevedo, "Hair," vv. 1-5). These words, and the torrent that follows in Acevedo's 2014 declamation of her poem "Hair,"[1] represent a declaration and a reclamation of feminine blackness: of black beauty, body, hair and subjectivity, in the face of psychological colonialism. A New York-born Afro-Dominican herself, Acevedo writes prolifically in affirmation of the Afro-Latina body and in resistance against the postcolonial hegemony that continues to confine and deform black female identities through the perpetuation of Eurocentric ideals of beauty. Her two poems, "Hair" and "Afro-Latina," speak to the same need for black female agency and body to be reclaimed from patriarchal recolonization. In both works, natural black hair, in all its waves and curls repressed by heat and chemical straightening, serves as the central imagery and symbol of Afro-Latina beauty reclaimed. When read together, "Hair" and "Afro-Latina" exemplify how the Afro-Latina body is the site where the colonization of beauty and the reclamation of black identity clash, and directly interrogate the pressure on Afro-Latina women to straighten and tame her hair in submission to postcolonialism's twofold repression of gender and race.

Historical Context and Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial oppression of the black body is enacted both under the white gaze and in the black psyche, writes Afro-Martinican psychologist Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Since the early 1500s when African slaves were imported by the West to the New World, white narrative have associated the African body with "Black Magic, primitive mentality, animism, [and] animal eroticism," which is "typical of peoples that have not kept pace with the evolution of the human race. Or, if one prefers, this is humanity at its lowest" (Fanon 96). By inscribing these mythologies of primitivism, animality, sensuality and sinfulness into the black body, the white colonial narrative dehumanized the African and justified his enslavement. While discrimination against darker-skinned peoples exists in various cultures, Harry Hoetink points out that extensive colonialism in the Americas has posited black skin and body at the lowest rung of social hierarchies. As a result, he writes, "throughout the Americas, features identified with black somatic norms are universally construed as ugly and undesirable, and features identified with white somatic norms are considered beautiful and desirable" (quoted by Candelario, 224). Thus the black body was dehumanized and Othered as a symbol of evil and ugliness, the antithesis of white beauty and righteousness, so that the Afro-descendant could justifiably be commodified to serve the purposes of Western colonial advancement.

Fanon also writes that colonialism impacted the black gaze to view its own body as Other and undesirable. He calls one's shame in one's own Afro-descendant physiognomy psychological colonization, and underscores how even years after abolition, the black in Latin America feels himself to be a spectacle: "Look, a Negro!" (82). Furthermore, the spectacle of a black body "in the white world [causes] the man of color [to encounter] difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity" (109). It is an act of self-negation because self-evaluation reveals that one's own black body has been socialized to be read as the antithesis to all Eurocentric standards of beauty. That is, where whiteness is a metric of moral goodness, physical attractiveness and socio-political value, the Afro-descendant falls short.

W.E.B. Du Bois expounds on self-negation as the root of the Afro-descendant's particular dilemma of a "double consciousness," or the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois n.p.). He adds, "One [the Afro-descendant being] feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." Du Bois' commentary can be read just as clearly into the discourse of Afro-descendant race in the Caribbean as it can in the United States from which he wrote. As a result of this double-consciousness, or this constant self-negation, Du Bois and Fanon would agree that the far-reaching impacts of colonialism on the psyche of blacks in the Americas would drive them to deny and find shame in the very Africanness of their roots.

The shame in one's black body for its dehumanization and undesirability under the white gaze acquires a layer of complexity when I consider the female Afro-descendant body. The history of the African slave woman in the Americas is marked not only by hard labor in the coffee and sugar plantations equal to that of her fellow male slave, but also by rape and abuse by white masters (Reddock 65). While the black slave woman was compelled into a position of sexual availability, at the same time her body continued to be read in stark contrast to the purity, femininity and social desirability of the white woman (Collins 72), thus writing a new chapter of shame into the female Afro-descendant physicality. Following the threads of the psychological colonialism that Fanon identified in the black Caribbean man, today the impacts of the shame impressed on the Afro-Latina woman for her body can be seen in her socialized desire to whiten herself and her descendants. By marrying white or marrying 'lighter,' the Afro-Latina of today hopes to '*adelantar la raza*,' or 'better the race,' as the saying in Latin America goes (Lamb and Dundes 3). *Adelantar la raza* is embedded in a larger discourse of *blanqueamiento*, or whitening of the race (Safa 307), by which postcolonial Latin America seeks to divorce itself from its African slave past and work toward a whiter, more privileged future. Thus, by marrying white, the Afro-descendant woman bears the burden of dissociating her children from the black body's tags of ugliness, sinfulness and undesirability (Fanon 33; Candelario 228), and gives her children a chance at higher financial achievement, educational opportunities and an outside perception of wealth (Torres-Saillant, "The Tribulations of Blackness" 1095).

M. Jacqui Alexander argues that Afro-descendant women's efforts to whiten their race, whether in their children's bodies or their own, are indicative of a type of recolonization. Colonialism has been in large part a patriarchal project of masculine violence exerted against women (Alexander, *Feminist Genealogies* xxiii), for it is through abuse and sexual assault on the female slave body, after all, that slave colonies produced new generations of plantation hands. This white masculine violence against black women now manifests as postcolonial suppression of feminine agency in self-presentation (Alexander, *Pedagogies* 64): in the social pressures to deny one's Africanness by speaking in a white-coded kind of morphology, for example, or by wearing one's hair pressed (Jordan-Zachery 33; Thompson 843). Candelario concurs that among Afro-Caribbeans, and especially among Afro-Dominicans, physical markers like pressed or straightened hair are indicative of social status and good race (223). For Noliwe Rooks and Cheryl Thompson, black-coded hairstyles such as braids and natural curls are often read in the lens of criminality (Rooks 287-88), or at the very least of lower education and intelligence and therefore a dimmer future (Thompson 843; Simmons 18). Thus, an Afro-descendant woman's decision to wear her hair natural or straightened is often a sociopolitical statement that fundamentally hearkens back to slavery, colonialism and black shame.

In response to the recolonizing pressure on Afro-descendant women to present themselves as white as possible, 'Molara Ogundipe-Leslie acknowledges that "women of the African heritage...must discover and affirm healthy and genuine versions of their various identities" (16). Healthy self-affirmation of identity, she writes, opens the path from marginality to empowerment (15), for Afro-descendant women are linked by "race through oppression" and by "culture as filtered and burnished in the crucibles of captivity, displacement, and oppression" (16). In this vein, black feminist Audre Lorde ascribes special significance to creative production, particularly poetry, as one of these aforementioned modes of self-affirmation for black women. "For women," she writes, "poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (Lorde 44). Through what she calls "poetry as illumination" (43), or activist poetry, Lorde also urges women of color to reclaim their 'erotic' power in the original sense of the word: their agency over their own bodies, in resistance to "suffering and self-negation" (47). Poetry, then, is a potent answer to the Afro-Latina woman's quest to reclaim her body from recolonization and dehumanization in a postcolonial world.

It is here that I locate the significance of Elizabeth Acevedo's poetry, as an artistic form of resistance against the mythologies and imaginaries of what a 'good' Afro-Latina or Afro-Dominican woman constitutes. In both "Afro-Latina" and "Hair," she evokes the history of slavery in the memory of the contemporary black female body. She challenges value judgments of women's self-presentation; she moves to subvert bodily shame into pride; and she celebrates the natural body and hair of the Afro-Latina as a reminder of oppression and the possibility of liberation.

Black Female Shame and Reclamation in Acevedo's Poems

"Afro-Latina" and "Hair" embody Acevedo's project to subvert black female shame into pride, and to reclaim power over one's body. She opens "Afro-Latina" by naming the racial stereotypes that orbit the Afro-Latina identity, and that triggered her identity crisis in her early years: stereotypes of salsa, *azúcar*, drumbeats and rhythm under her skin, and Spanish whispered in her ear as a baby which she soon forgets as she grows up (vv. 20). The speaker then describes the shame she has felt in her own knowledge of Spanish, her Latino cuisine and her kinky hair. As she rejects "habichuela y mangú" for "Happy Meals / and Big Macs" (vv. 23-25), she also straightens her hair "in imitation of Barbie" (v. 27), that quintessential image of the blonde, smooth-tressed white beauty sold to women and girls alike. The speaker is moreover "embarrassed" by her mother's "eh broken inglee / which cracked [her] pride" (vv. 28, 31-33), and for this reason, goes to great lengths to dissociate herself from the immigrant stereotype, the most recognizable imagery of Otherness in a woman's hair and tongue. The speaker admits to "poking fun" at her mother's accent, "hoping to lessen / the humiliation" (vv. 37-38). While the lyric voice looks back on her past behavior now with shame for her immaturity and self-denial, the younger version of herself was driven by a different kind of shame entirely, the humiliation of being recognized, tagged and rejected as foreign and Other.

The clash between Africanness and Eurocentrism in the body and self-awareness of the speaker is evident when she recounts how "proud" she was in the past to call herself "American," a concept she places in direct opposition to her “caramel-color skin” which she hates (vv. 39-44). For her, being born in the United States necessitated self-negation of any other identity except whiteness, despite the fact that she is not white and can neither be perceived externally as white. Acevedo’s choice of words in reference to her *mulata* skin tone here is significant: at the same time that “caramel” produces vivid imagery, it is also an allusion to the sugar or *azúcar* that is interwoven into her ancestral memory of enslaved Africans on the plantations of Latin American colonies. Indeed, the following lines of the poem invoke that very memory, for here the speaker has decided that she must cease to forget her origins and remember her roots to be free of the white mythology of Americanness. “How quickly we forget / where we come from,” she laments (vv. 48-49). She goes on:

> So remind me,
> remind me
> that I come from
> the Taínos of the río
> the Aztec,
> the Mayan,
> Los Incas,
> los Españoles
> con sus fincas
> buscando oro,
> and the Yoruba Africanos
> que con sus manos
> built a mundo
> nunca imaginado. (vv. 50-63)

Here the speaker rebukes her younger self for her conscious amnesia, and instead insists on remembrance no matter how painful it might be. It is an all-encompassing remembrance of colonialism, recuperating both memories of indigenous invasion by the *conquistadores* and the displacement and enslavement of Africans whose exploited labor built the colonies into the world economies that they are today. Whereas the opening of the poem referenced the younger speaker’s rejection of Spanish to forcibly remove herself from her Otherness, here in the moment of memory the speaker embraces code-switching between English and Spanish wholeheartedly. The tension between Americanness and Afro-Latinidad within the poetic voice, then, begins to find resolution in the very act of renouncing racial and cultural amnesia.

For Acevedo, renouncing amnesia and shame is centered on confronting the traumas in her ancestry. Just as in “Hair,” where the lyric voice incorporates visceral imageries of shipwrecks and African cousins trapped in ship bellies, in “Afro-Latina” she names the violence that is so formative to her identity today. She comes “from cocoa, / from sugarcane” (vv. 66-67), or from the memories of African bodies beaten into submission to serve the colonial project. Not merely as an Afro-descendant but also as a woman, the speaker comes from “the children / of slaves / and slave masters” (vv. 68-70), which resulted in her “beautifully tragic mixture” of *mestizaje*, or mixed race (v. 71). And now that she has begun to remember, the speaker finds that she “can't seem to escape / the thought / of lost lives / and indigenous rape” (vv. 75-78). A specifically feminine trauma haunts the speaker’s new awareness of her body and her Afro-Latinidad. The collective memory of violated indigenous women and black women infiltrates her sense of self today. Thus, to go on denying the fact of her blackness and latinidad would be to drink from a cup of poison: an unethical erasure of the violence committed against her foremothers and therefore an erasure of herself.

The beautiful tragedy that the speaker of “Afro-Latina” ascribes to *mestizaje* goes beyond the history of physical violence in colonialism. The poet’s implicit reference to *mestizaje* and her lament over it, are especially significant when read against the history of national identity formation in Latin America. Following the nineteenth-century sweep of independence movements throughout Latin America from Spain’s colonial hold, nations began to form their political identity on an ideology of *mestizaje*, which “celebrated racial and cultural mixture [between Spanish and indigenous peoples] as a way of forging a unified and homogenous national image at the same time that it reasserted the supremacy of the European race and civilization by favoring *blanqueamiento* or whitening” (Safa 307). For this reason, the ethnic tags of *Hispanic*, *Latino* or *mestizo* became an acceptable “alternative to blackness” (Candelario 12). When considered in light of the heavily charged meanings of *mestizaje*, the speaker’s choice to remember her “beautifully tragic mixture” becomes incredibly complex. At the same time that she acknowledges her Spanish and indigenous roots, she also confronts the ironic erasure of another core part of herself—her Africanness—by the narrative of *mestizaje*. What she proposes here, then, by sidestepping the *mestiza* tag entirely and naming every race that flows in her veins, from the Taíno to the Yoruba, is a new recognition of her racial mixture. She reproves the forgetting of her blackness, for it is the “Afro” that makes her “Afro-Latina,” and demands as much pride in her caramel body as her Latinidad.

Acevedo drives home the theme of the poisonous nature of amnesia when, toward the end of “Afro-Latina,” she compares remembering to being. The speaker declares, “We are deformed / and reformed / beings” (vv. 98-100). The poetic voice asserts that to forget one’s own heritage and ancestral heritage is to submit to deformation—to recolonization; and remembering one’s Africanness alongside one’s indigenous and Spanish roots is key to reformation. Significantly, by using the word “beings” as opposed to *humans* or *people*, the lyric voice of “Afro-Latina” predicts that choosing to continue living in amnesia is to cease to be. For Acevedo, memory is existence; existence is reclamation; and reclamation is the first critical step to breaking out of psychological recolonization.

At the close of “Afro-Latina,” the lyric voice circles back to hair as a physical representation of self-reclamation—this time not to visualize the locks straightened like a Barbie doll’s, but rather to acknowledge them as “not a cultural wedlock, / hair too kinky for Spain, / too wavy for dreadlocks” (vv. 109-111). These lines underscore how the Afro-Latina is suspended between Europeanness and Africanness. Born of the violence against both indigenous and black women, the modern Afro-Latina finds her space neither in the whiteness of the colonizer nor the blackness of the former slaves. In this vein, the verses could even be argued to read of a double Otherness, a suppression of existence outside white Euro-American and black African identities simultaneously. Presenting herself with her natural hair in the pan-Afro-Latino context is therefore culturally and politically significant because it is a declaration of existence—of *being*—in opposition to racial binaries. For according to her, “We are every / ocean crossed” (vv. 119-120) and “Our bodies / have been bridges” (vv. 123-124). And in reclamation of a space and subjectivity just for her, she declares, “We are… / black / brown / beautiful. / Viviremos para siempre / Afro-Latinos / hasta la muerte” (vv. 125, 128-133). In so few words, Acevedo concludes her poem with an aesthetic rhetoric against the ugliness of blackness and the Otherness of Africanness, and substitutes shame for pride in the Afro-Latina body.

The themes of shame and reclamation come to the fore once again in “Hair.” The poem reads at once as a soliloquy, a response to an unnamed Afro-Dominican mother, and a manifesto for young Afro-Latina women who will soon parent their own black daughters. The six stanzas of free verse progress from a lament against the mother’s command to “fix” the speaker’s hair, to a recuperation of the history of pain and survival in slavery that is found in one’s black locks, to a declaration that the speaker will work to make the next generation proud of its own African body and tresses. The speaker immediately decodes the word “fix” as a euphemism for “straighten, whiten” (v. 2), in conformity with Eurocentric standards of physical attractiveness. Beyond attractiveness, even, there is first the notion of brokenness versus acceptability inscribed into the word “fix.” Both “straighten” and “whiten” carry these double entendres. The former refers to transforming kinky curls into long, limp tresses, while at the same time implying a kind of social deviance that must be ironed out before the Afro-Latina speaker can be considered presentable to the world. “Whiten,” meanwhile, refers to the social codification of such self-presentation as ‘white,’ or ‘white enough.’ The speaker’s choice to juxtapose these two words in her redefinition of “fix” highlights that before she can be perceived as beautiful, the Afro-Latina first be perceived as acceptable—and that the only acceptable standard in her contemporary society is the white one.

The poetic voice of “Hair” likewise posits “fix” in opposition to “this shipwrecked history of hair” (vv. 3-4) to argue the very impossibility of her mother’s command to “fix” herself. Following in the vein of the speaker’s definition of “fix” as *erase* and *Europeanize*, it is clear that for the speaker, the very history of slavery inscribed in the Afro-descendant body poses an impossible chasm of difference between black and white. In her “history of hair” there is shipwreck—a synecdochal image of the transatlantic slave trade and a comment on the irrevocable crossing over from one continent to another. The ship has not only traversed the Atlantic, but it has also been wrecked, without possibility of returning from whence it came—in the same way that the violence and the memory of slavery cannot be reversed, either from the white gaze or the black.

In light of her shipwrecked identity, says the lyric voice, she finds in her hair “the true meaning of / strand-ed” (vv. 4-5). The syllabication of “strand-ed” transcribes several messages at once. In the first place, it nods to the permanence of trauma from slavery in the Afro-descendant memory. The careful syllabication also acknowledges that once the slave ship crossed the Atlantic, an inevitable difference began to grow between those free blacks still on the African continent and those enslaved in the New World. And, in turn, it underscores a new space and culture where the black body born into slavery or postcoloniality can neither Europeanize itself to climb up the social ladder, or return to its African roots to understand them profoundly and in entirety. In other words, the fact of slavery has transformed the fact of blackness for those Afro-descendants born in the Americas, in a way that continental Africans have no access to and white colonialists would rather repress.

Despite the slave ship symbolizing the birth of a violent new space where the black body began to drift between Africanness and commodified slave identity, the speaker of “Hair” still invokes her own imaginary of the voices of her African ancestors and their grief over the trauma and amnesia of their great-grandchildren. She writes:

> [...] When tresses hug tight
> like African cousins in ship bellies.
> Did they imagine that their great grand-children
> would look like us? And would hate them

> how we do? Trying to find a way to erase
> them from our skin; iron them out of our hair. (vv. 5-10)

In the stanza quoted above, the poetic voice creates a familial imagery of bodies and faces that might feel more personal to the audience than the mere mention of shipwreck and history in the lines prior. Grounding herself in this image, the speaker then speaks out of shame and guilt, though not the kind of colonized shame that often colors an Afro-Latina woman's perception of her body and hair. Rather, she feels ashamed of her gestures of denial of those African cousins and ancestors who suffered and survived slavery only to be denied in the bodies and memories of their descendants. Moreover, the poetic voice's rhetorical question about whether her ancestors would hate their great-grandchildren "the way we do" reminds the audience that at the same time that the modern Afro-Latina hates her body for its blackness, her African great-grandmothers might hate her for erasing that same blackness and heritage from her head. This tension circumscribing the contemporary black Latin/a American female body adds yet another dimension to the meaning of "strand-ed," or an cultural entrapment born of self-negation.

The decoding of Eurocentric beauty standards in "Hair" first questions the need to be acceptable under the white gaze, and then recuperates memories of slavery and survival to subvert the guilt complex imposed on black bodies by white postcoloniality. In the stanza that follows, the speaker moves beyond aesthetics and memory to argue that allowing one's natural black hair and body to *be* is the very essence of what it means to exist. As the poetic voice puts it, "This wild tangle of hair that *strangles air*, / you call them wild curls. I call them *breathing*" (vv. 11-12; emphasis added). Once again the tension between shame for being black and shame for erasing one's blackness is brought to the fore. On one hand, the Afro-Latina described by the poetic voice feels that her "wild" hair asphyxiates her and prevents her from presenting in the Euro-conforming, non-exoticized manner for which she aspires. The mere curls on her head inscribe into her body the tags of *irruption*, *specimen* and *Other* (Morrison 84) and therefore identify her as ugly and undesirable. But on the other hand, the Afro-Latina also knows that no matter how many times she "fixes" her hair, there will always be a "wild tangle" that springs up again "in this wet hair that waves like hello" (v. 14), because what she represses is irrepressible. What the speaker calls for is for that repression to be abolished: for the perception of one's own curly hair to shift from restrictive to liberating. "Fixing" her hair to be acceptable and to apologize for her own existence only works to undermine and deform it. Straightening and grooming her tresses to Eurocentric standards, says the speaker, is the true gesture of self-asphyxiation, and letting her natural locks exist freely is to let herself breathe, just as much as it is to be liberated, unlike her foremothers in slavery.

The speaker of "Hair" speaks specifically from an Afro-Dominican perspective of Negrophobic culture as she moves into the third stanza. "They say Dominicans can do the best hair," she declares, "But what they mean is we are the best at / swallowing amnesia in a cup of morir soñando: / die dreaming" (vv. 15, 17-18). The reference to amnesia here is multilayered. While the poetic voice claims that she remembers the bodies and travails of her enslaved African ancestors, she also admonishes the typical Afro-Dominican woman for forgetting these formative traumas in her identity. For Dominicans, the relationship between blackness and their national identity has been especially violent and tumultuous. Dominican sentiments of Negrophobia trace back to longstanding tension with the neighboring Haiti, which "as the first black republic of the Americas [which won its independence in 1804] ... posed a great ideological and political challenge to white-supremacist, slaveholding states in the Western Hemisphere," Ginetta B.

Candelario explains (Candelario 37). In a gesture of dissociation from this problematic Haiti that threatened the white supremacy of Creoles in the Dominican Republic, the new Dominican government highlighted all physical and cultural signifiers of Haiti's Otherness--its voodoo religion, its French colonial roots and, above all, its nearly homogeneous black population--and postured itself as the antithesis: a Catholic, Spanish, *mestizo* nation (Candelario 38, Sagás 96). Dominican Negrophobia reached its pinnacle during the 1930-61 Trujillato, or the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, who ordered the covert massacre of Haitians and Dominican-Haitians on the border between the two nations in 1937 (Sagás 103; Moreno 172; García-Peña 152) and declared the official Dominican ethnicity as *indio*, or indigenous, regardless of skin color or Afro-descendant physiognomy (Candelario 58; Torres-Saillant, "Meditations" 7). This gesture of exchanging one's blackness for alternative ethnic tags is the same kind of forgetting that the lyric voice of "Hair" rebukes and reads into the "fixing" of one's hair.

The imagery of swallowing amnesia as if from a cup also points to a deliberateness to the act of forgetting, as in blacking out a trauma, and suggests that doing so is like poison: drinking from the proverbial cup of hemlock juice. Indeed, she calls the cup a drink of "morir soñando"—a play on name for the Dominican drink sugar, orange juice and ice—and restates the phrase in English for emphasis as "[to] die dreaming." What does the amnesiac Afro-Dominican dream of? Freedom, perhaps, from the fact of blackness. It is significant that the phrase "morir soñando: die dreaming" is divided not only by enjambment, but also by two languages, first in Spanish and then code-switching back to English, in yet another reflection of the two-sided tension between African pride and colonized shame that flanks the Afro-Latina body. In the logic of the speaker, it would seem that the solution to escaping this two-pronged anxiety is to reject the cup of amnesia to begin with, for it is an imperfect poison that kills the soul but not the body and therefore continues to trap the Afro-Latina in a lost and deformed identity.

The last three stanzas of the poem weave the socio-political topic of hair together with one of the other as yet unaddressed ways in which Afro-Latinas seek to whiten their race: by marrying white or marrying lighter—that is, *adelantando la raza*. "Why would you date a black man?" she asks the audience, reiterating the same rhetoric of reproach from her childhood against marrying a fellow Afro-descendant (v. 22). In the same spirit of redefining sayings and euphemisms, the lyric voice points out:

> What they mean is: a prieto cocolo?
> What they mean is: Why would two oppressed people
> come together? It's two times the trouble…
> What they really mean: Have you thought
> of your daughter's hair? (vv. 23-27)

The uniquely Dominican sentiment of anti-Haitian negrophobia is coded into the *prieto cocolo* of the first verse quoted above, for it references those Afro-descendants of non-Hispanic nationality or origin. In this way, the fact of being black is associated with anti-nationalism, a tenuous but inseverable link left by the Hispanophile legacy of the Trujillato. The arguments above against dating a black man, moreover, inevitably circle back to the desire to whiten one's own race to escape the inscriptions of Otherness and ugliness in the black body. The implications of marrying black, the speaker notes, extend beyond the physical into the emotional and political, for it would be foolish for "two oppressed people" to "come together" and thereby fail to break the cycle of shame in the African body. And, ultimately, the one who pays the price for such a union is the black daughter of two black parents, who will inherit the same "wild curls" as her mother and orbit through the same spaces of anxiety, guilt and deformed identity.

Acevedo's poem offers a vehement counter-rhetoric of its own against centuries of shame imposed on the black Afro-Latina body. She writes that she will embrace her own children as "the children of children of fields" (v. 30), in open acknowledgment of the plantation slaves that were her and their forefathers and foremothers. She will let her "curtain of curls blanket [them] from the world" in a gesture of protection and love. More importantly, she will instill into her daughters how they are "beautiful of dusked skin, diamond eyes," with "hair of / reclamation" (vv. 32-34). Just as in the first stanza where enjambment strategically highlighted the word "strand-ed" at the beginning of a line, so does the division of the phrase "hair of reclamation" emphasize the latter word. Reclamation, in fact, can be read as an intentional contrast to strandedness, for the two words describe the speaker's hair before and after her moment of epiphany. If the speaker's mother's command to "fix" her hair surfaces the speaker's shipwrecked suspension between authenticity and Eurocentrism, then her decision to let her daughters' hair be braided in "pride down their back" (v. 34) in "reclamation" is a tangible form of resistance against psychological colonialism. It is an act not of self-negation, as Fanon describes the Afro-descendant's consciousness of her own body, but rather one of self-affirmation: the reformation of a deformed identity. After all, says the speaker, "You cannot fix what was never broken" (v. 39).

Conclusion

The racial and gendered tenor of Acevedo's poems analyzed above reflects the ache of Afro-Latina women writers for "change…[and] justice" in the midst of postcolonial "paternalism" (Adams 22). More specifically, "Afro-Latina" and "Hair" highlight bodily presentation as one of the most impactful sites of the traumatic clash between blackness and Eurocentrism that can still be reclaimed through deliberate remembrance. For the lyric voice in Acevedo's poems, the choice to straighten one's hair or wear it natural pierces deeper than the physical. It is a decision pregnant with the tensions between self-negation and reclamation, between shame and pride, between ugliness and beauty, and between deformation and reformation. It is clear that Acevedo's sociopolitical stance is in staunch support of expressing one's Africanness to the full extent of one's physicality. Rooks cautions that self-presentation of the female Afro-descendant body, particularly of hair, is polemical; and that arguments can be made either for going natural to demonstrate cultural pride, or for pressing one's locks for personal preference or to access spaces of privilege only open to those who present as white-coded (282). Regardless of each Afro-Latina woman's personal motivations for pressing her hair or leaving it free, what Acevedo is concerned with in "Afro-Latina" and "Hair" is interrogating the fact that societal pressures to "fix" one's locks exist in the first place. This reading of the two poems reveal that Acevedo reads between the lines of these societal pressures an ineluctable exotification of the Afro-Latina as Other, and a subscription to hegemonic narratives of what is acceptable and human and what is not.

Acevedo's works are certainly a powerful exposé of the tags of ugliness, sinfulness, primitivism and undesirability that have been codified into the black female body since colonialism and slavery. Her poems are even more meaningful, however, for their audience who, like the speaker, are "every ocean crossed" and "have been bridges." Both pieces speak to the Afro-descendant woman in the interstices of cultures, too exotic to be Spanish, too dark to be *india*, too far removed from Africa to be African. The African roots that Acevedo exhorts her readers to remember with pride are, simultaneously, an Africanidad that cannot be separated from her

Latinidad. She holds her foremothers in shipholds in remembrance, indeed, not so that she may identify as one and the same with them, but so that she may reclaim a piece of the bodily puzzle that completes her complex identity. And by remembering her roots, says Acevedo, she combats psychological recolonization; she begins to dismantle the burden of shame in the Afro-Latina body; she resolves to set a new path of self-awareness for her future daughters; and she rejects the venom of self-negation. By renouncing self-whitening gestures, Acevedo offers the promise to her readers that the Afro-Latina can be empowered in her difference, and celebrate every diverse piece of the Afro-Latina subjectivity.

Endnote

1. See the 2014 video recording of Elizabeth Acevedo's declamation of "Hair," referenced on SlamFind's website via this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0svS78Nw_yY.

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