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Slaves and Slavery in the 19th Century Puerto Rican Literature

Abstract: This paper will focus on the literary treatments of slaves and slavery in Puerto Rican literature in the 19th century. It argues that such treatments, including those in the Puerto Rican periodicals and other 19th century literary publications on the island, offer a much more complex understanding of slavery and human oppression in general than we can usually find in sociological or even psychological studies of these social phenomena.

Keywords: Puerto Rican Literature; South America; Slavery; Benito Vilardell; Salvador Brau; Ramón C.F. Caballero; Alejandro Tapia y Rivera; Ramón Méndez Quiñones.

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This paper is part of a larger, ongoing project on *The Slave as Liminal Figure in 19th Century Puerto Rican Literature (1820-1873)*, which has grown out of the research I did for my book on *El costumbrismo en la prensa puertorriqueña del siglo XIX* (Pliegos: Madrid, 2005). That book focused on the costumbrismo movement as reflected in the 19th century Puerto Rican journals and newspapers. It proposed a comparative, historical and theoretical framework, in the larger context of the European, Latin American, and Caribbean costumbrismo, to classify, analyze, and evaluate a large number of costumbrista works that I researched in the 19th century periodicals preserved on the Island. During my research I came across a number of essays on slavery as well as short literary pieces, such as dialogues and short stories in which slaves were featured as main characters. I did mention some of them in my book, but I did not elaborate on the specific theme of slavery, feeling that it deserved full attention in a separate study. It is this study that I have now undertaken, and the present paper is part of it.

In this new project, I focus especially on the literary treatment of slaves and slavery not only in the Puerto Rican



periodicals but also in Puerto Rican literature in general, from 1820, when the printing press was introduced on the island, to 1873, when slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico and other Spanish colonies. There is an impressive number of historical and sociological studies on slavery in Puerto Rico, as well as general histories of slavery in the Caribbean. However, there are considerably fewer literary analyses of the topic and none that I could find in English.

Furthermore, the two or three most recent literary studies in Spanish equally adopt a sociological approach to slavery, characteristic of postcolonial literary studies. I contend, however, that literary treatments of slavery, including those in the Puerto Rican periodicals and other 19th century literary publications on the island, offer a much more complex understanding of slavery and human oppression in general than we can usually find in sociological or even psychological approaches to these social phenomena. Literary pieces such as Benito Vilardell's "Diálogos Grotescos" ("Grotesque dialogues," 1852-1853), Salvador Brau's poem "Díavendra" (1863), Ramón C.F. Caballero's literary skit "La juega de gallo o El negro bozal" (The Rooster Game or the African-Born Negro, 1852), Alejandro Tapia y Rivera's play, *La cuarterona* (1867) and Ramón Méndez-Quñones's play, *!PobreSinda!* (Poor Sinda!, unpublished manuscript, probably written in the 1870s) do point out the dismal condition of the slave, racial prejudice, social injustice, and the decadence of the colonial oppressors. But, even more importantly, these texts give the black slave a transformative voice, showing that s/he can very well function as the moral conscience of Puerto Rican colonial society.

The black slaves presented in these and other Puerto Rican literary pieces can play a transformative role because they are not marginal, but *liminal* figures. The word "liminal" comes from the Greek and Latin root *limen* – "harbor," i.e., the place between land and sea, but also "threshold," denoting a transitional or in-between space. Victor Turner, in his book on *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982), looks at liminal spaces between various social structures or between different cultures, as "seeds of cultural creativity" that can generate new cultural models and paradigms. These models and paradigms "feed back into the central economic and politico-legal domains... supplying them with goals, aspirations, incentives, and structural motives." (Turner 1982, 28)

The foregoing citation shows that Turner discusses liminality in terms of a dynamic of margin and center. On the other hand, he does acknowledge that the marginal may turn into the "cunicular," or a "tunnel" leading away from the center (Turner 1982, 41). Building on this insight, one may further develop Turner's theory of liminality by drawing a clear distinction between the marginal and the liminal: whereas the marginal can never transcend the dialectic of margin and center, always leading back to the center, the liminal can move away from the center into alternative realities.

In this regard, literary discourse is liminal, rather than marginal, despite the prevailing contemporary views to the contrary: by staging a real or imagined state of affairs and presenting it from various perspectives, literature can contribute to a better understanding of the existential choices open to the community and can



play a significant role in proposing modes of historical change. I contend that this is precisely the transformative role that the Puerto Rican literary pieces about the Afro-Hispanic slave and slavery have played in Puerto Rican society. Liminal figures such as Tapia y Rivera's "la cuarterona" or Sinda in Méndez-Quiñones's play unmask not only the grotesque faces of colonialism, but also point to the peaceful ways in which Puerto Rican society can become regenerated through compassion, justice and equal opportunity for all of its members.

In the present paper, I have chosen the liminal figure of a Black slave, Pablo or Congo as a case study to support my thesis. Pablo/ Congo is the main character in a series of dialogues published in two magazine columns: one was called "Variedades" (Varieties) and the other was alternately called "Diálogo grotesco," "Diálogo semi-serio," or simply "Diálogo." The two columns appeared in *El Ponceño*, a liberal cultural magazine that was founded in 1852, was suppressed in 1854, and then reappeared in 1855 under a new name, *El Fénix*. Pablo/ Congo was the main protagonist of the columns, in addition to other characters that would swap postcards, or even entire columns, among them. Because of political censorship, the author of the "Diálogos" and the "Variedades" remained anonymous at the time, but was later revealed to be Benito Vilardell, a liberal Spanish journalist who had emigrated to Puerto Rico from Catalonia.

Vilardell himself pointed out that he used the character of the Black slave as a literary device to convey his own critical views and satirical observations of the Puerto Rican colonial society of his time. For example, he writes "Ciertos abusos

hijos de las costumbres y que no se podían remediar porque las autoridades no podían descender a examinar por si mismas... Quien podia denunciar tales abusos mayor que un criado?" (Cited in José Curet 1986, 36)

This citation shows that Vilardell himself recognizes the liminal nature of his literary character. Pablo/ Congo, as his double name reveals, moves between two worlds: the world of his Spanish masters and the world of his African ancestors. At discovered him in London and brought him to Puerto Rico. Furthermore, he brought Pablo/ Congo to the island in a "magnetised" state, which makes him both a sleepwalker and a medium – a puppet on a string and an oracle.

In turn, the author Vilardell is no less of a liminal figure, because in the "Diálogos" and the "Variedades" he projects himself as the master of Pablo/ Congo and assumes the fictional name of Justo, an obviously ironic reference to (social) justice. He plays the ironic role of a typical Spanish colonial slave owner of his day, with all his paternalistic prejudices and moral flaws. The two characters engage in "grotesque" dialogues that open a liminal, double-edged fictional space at once comic and tragic, playful and serious. On the one hand, they point to the injustices and the absurdities of colonial society and, on the other hand, to the commonsensical, non-violent solutions needed to reform such a "grotesque" social order.

Pablo/ Congo changes identities and dramatic functions at the drop of a hat, according to what Vilardell chooses as the object of his satire. His master describes him as a "typical" Black slave – lazy, irresponsible, and a drunkard. Yet he proves to be the opposite of that colonialist cliché.



A few illustrations from the “Diálogos” and the “Variedades” will reveal the multiple functions that Pablo/ Congo plays in Vilardell’s literary pieces.

In “Variedades: a mislectoras” (no. 11, September 18, 1852), the columnist Justo introduces Pablo as a ladies’ confidant who takes their side in the “war” of the sexes: “Hay cosas en la vida que no se deben saber o invadir, pero las infidelidades de los amantes, la incredulidad vuestra y las intenciones de los que creéis que deliran por vosotras, esto es jurisdicción de Pablo; este terreno no le debe ser vedado, porque redundará en vuestro bien.” This role, therefore, is far from being that of an irresponsible drunkard; rather, Justo uses him to expose some of the moral flaws of the Spanish colonial masters.

Justo also uses Pablo to criticize the dishonest practices in the market of Ponce, practices that are tolerated by the corrupt local authorities. Of course, whenever Pablo does this, his master corrects and chastens him, declaring that such practices do not exist in Puerto Rico. For example, in a “Diálogo grotesco” (no. 10, September 11, 1852), when the slave complains that the prices are unreasonably high in the market, Justo his master accuses him of being a drunk and a gossip. He asks his readers to ignore his slave, because he does not want to get in trouble with the authorities over Congo’s irresponsible prattle.

In another “Diálogo grotesco” (supplement, no. 11, September 18, 1852), Pablo complains he could not buy *bacalao*, because it was rotten. His master promptly censors him as a “liar,” because the authorities would never allow stale products to be sold in the market. A similar complaint about the market appears in “Diálogo

grotesco” (no. 16 of October 23, 1852), but in this case Pablo pretends to praise the excellent job that the authorities have done in investigating market abuses. Of course, this time Justo does not accuse him of being a lying drunkard, even though the slave does not tell the truth.

In other dialogues, Pablo/ Congo criticizes the bad condition of Puerto Rican roads, even though the local government has received 25,000 pesos to repair them (no. 19, November 13, 1852). The implication is that the authorities are corrupt, using these funds to enrich themselves and their friends. Here, again, the master joins Congo in thanking, tongue-in-cheek, his Excellency, Capitán General D. Fernando Norzagaray, for all the “good” things he has done for the island.

In another “Diálogo grotesco” (no. 44, April 30, 1853), we have a playful reenactment of the scene in *Don Quijote* where Sancho Panza is appointed governor of the island Barataria. Congo announces that he has been appointed plenipotentiary minister of *El Ponceño* in Arecibo. Before his departure, Justo gives him some good advice, just as Don Quijote does to Sancho. But, this advice is just another tongue-in-cheek critique of the colonial administration of Puerto Rico: “que seas circunspecto, y que nunca intentes amenazar con escuadras, ni ejércitos: procura si te es posible protocolizar todas las cuestiones por difíciles que se representen a primera vista. La solución está en los correos de gabinete y esto en comparación de los males que se evitan es nada. No te alteres, no salgas nunca de una prudente reserva y cuando digas, si o no, dilo con puntos suspensivos, para en la segunda sesión poder añadir o quitar en caso de sorpresa.”



In “Variedades: Congo, los perros y el gato” (no. 74, November 26, 1853), Justo and Congo overhear the conversation of some dogs, complaining that they were being fed poisoned meat, even though they did not harm anyone and were loyal to their masters. A cat arrives on the scene and insults the dogs for being so humble and submissive. The cat encourages them to become smarter and not to allow themselves to be abused. This is a transparent political allegory on the loyal and submissive character of the Puerto Rican people who endure the abuses of their colonial masters without rebelling against them.

In addition to criticizing the authorities, a number of the dialogues between Pablo/ Congo and Justo satirize the backward mentality of the Island, such as its religious obscurantism, particularly certain superstitions about the dead and their contact with the living. Spiritualism was the rage in those days, and many newspapers profited financially from it. Consequently, *El Ponceño* ridiculed them, exposing fraudulent spiritualist practices and trying to steer the public away from them. For example, in “Magnetismo” (no 13, October 2, 1852), Pablo confesses to his master that he is afraid of gravediggers and zombies, but in the end Justo persuades him to take heart and die in peace, because there are much worse things happening among the living than among the dead.

In “Letter to Cabullas” (no 52, June 25, 1853), Congo writes that there are persons (spiritualists) who claim that they make the dead speak, but that he has no use for people who presume to interfere with his eternal rest. He adds that nothing good can come of spiritualism; consequently, the authorities should prohibit it. Likewise, in

“Cosas nuevas” (no 66, October 10, 1853), Congo says that he wants to leave the country because he has had enough of all of the spiritualists who speak to the dead. Justo replies that many a publication takes advantage of people’s ignorance out of pure greed, and that the best weapon to combat spiritualist practices is true (Catholic) religion.

Another object of satire in the “Diálogos grotescos” concerns aspects of the cultural life of the Island whose quality, according to *El Ponceño*, could stand improvement. The dialogical form allows the columnist, through Pablo/ Congo, to express critical opinions on various cultural events, such as theatrical performances, or on the public itself, without assuming direct responsibility for such opinions. For example, “Diálogo semi-serio” (no 22, November 27, 1852) parodies the comedy that Justo and his slave have just seen at the theater in Ponce. The comedy, most likely, was a conventional piece that, among other things, idealized the paternalistic relationship between masters and slaves and, therefore, had no problem passing the strict censorship of the military authorities. Congo “praises” the comedy to his master, saying he always feels like crying with joy whenever he beholds a loyal and dedicated slave who has aged in his master’s service. Justo agrees that there is nothing more inspiring than the sight of a faithful and obedient old slave, adding on a false, theatrical tone: “Portándote bien, no te faltara la recompensa.”

The exchange between the master and slave ends, anti-climatically, with Congo’s comment that the military authorities should prohibit the persons with influenza from attending theatrical performances,



because one could not hear the dialogue with all that coughing. In another “Diálogo Semi-serio” (no 23, December 4, 1852), Congo almost gets punished because he criticizes his master’s poor theatrical performance, but the latter blames, in turn, the spectators who were so noisy during the play that they made him forget his lines.

A good number of dialogues satirize the Puerto Rican public as being capricious and full of prejudices, not to mention the fact that they are always late in sending their subscriptions to the paper. Like other newspapermen of his time, Justo constantly complains about his thankless profession. For example, in “Variedades: A mis lectoras” (no 61, August 27, 1853), the columnist says he is very tired and wants to change professions. The public is never satisfied, and he cannot satisfy the demands and complaints of everyone. In turn, “Diálogo a un dialoguista” (no 27, January 1, 1853), comments on the status of the Island’s journalists in those days: they worked like slaves and received no social recognition; on the contrary, they were criticized or even persecuted by those who did not share their views. Congo becomes the director of *El Ponceño* by dint of being the only one to go from house to house collect votes, because everyone else connected with the newspaper was busy. Consequently, Congo will be “director y dictador de *El Ponceño* por espacio de tres meses, quitando y poniendo, cortando y corrigiendo a su sabor los trece números al de hoy inclusive.”

The slave takes his work very seriously, but, as we learn from “Congo a los SRES. Suscriptores” (no 28, January 8, 1853), he is upset that some readers complain about his articles as well. In “Diálogo grotesco” (no 29, January 15, 1853) we find out about

editorship and some strategies of avoiding legal prosecution. Congo asks his master what the phrase “testa-ferro” means. Justo explains that if you compose a work and do not want it known you are the author, you get a testa-ferro to sign it in your place. Congo responds that in a certain manner he is a testa-ferro as well (Villardel’s playful allusion to his fictional alter egos). The political context of this dialogue is obvious: journalists had to publish anonymously or under a pseudonym to avoid persecution on the part of the military authorities.

Unfortunately, the most virulent attacks against the journals and the journalists came from each other, thus facilitating the task of the censors. Several letters to and from Congo and his friends engage in polemics with other journalists, with the result that one of them threatens to go to Ponce and break Congo’s neck, because he refuses to publish one of his sonnets. (“Variedades: Diálogo,” no. 76, December 10, 1853).

As Congo “dies,” the columnist uses his death to introduce another theme that is very common in 19th-century Puerto Rican journalism: the notorious poverty of newspapermen who were constantly running away from creditors. In “Variedades: A Juan Melapampas” (no 80, January 7, 1854) he publishes a letter that Congo sends from Purgatory to one of the creditors who pursues him even after death. The creditor has written that the most common disease ravaging the Island at the moment is “arranquitis” (“povertitis”) and lack of “macuquina” (equivalent of English “lolly”).

Congo replies that there is plenty of money, but that it is inequitably distributed in society. He says that seeing the misery



and pain that reigned on Earth, he prayed to God to give him eternal rest. Significantly, the columnist has Congo go neither to Heaven nor to Hell, but to Purgatory – the “transicional” space between the two. This again shows the liminal position of the black slave who is between two worlds. Of course, the columnist could not have sent him to Heaven – a place presumably reserved for the colonial masters – nor to Hell, despite the fact that Justo accuses his slave of being a liar and a cheat. In any case, Congo ironically ends his letter by saying that lying and hypocrisy are capital sins and have no place in Purgatory, thereby revealing the falsity of his master’s earlier accusations against him.

In “Variedades: Diálogo” (no 81, January 14, 1854), the columnist introduces Vicente, an old Black slave who will replace Congo. Vicente speaks several languages and knows just about everyone in town. Here, again, Vilardell exposes the clichés about slaves as being ignorant, lazy and good-for-nothing “malingerers.” In fact, many of the ads that appear in *El Ponceño* in relation to the slave trade are a very interesting source of information for the study of slavery in Puerto Rico. They reveal that, in a number of cases, the slaves were better educated than their masters. For example, one of the ads describes Walington, “a forty-year old, tall and agile black slave with very fine features, born in S. Eustaquio; speaks perfect Spanish, French, and English” (no. 8, August 28, 1852, my translation).

After the columnist introduces Vicente, he gives the slave instructions concerning his new responsibilities as director of *El Ponceño*. Vicente must pay close attention to everything that goes on in town, listen to every rumor, divine what may

happen in the future, and be friends with everyone and no one. This is an ironical, but accurate, description of what newspapermen were expected to be like in those days, when they were often seen as mere “gossip peddlers.”

In turn, the authorities regarded journalists as potential trouble-makers and “rabble-rousers” and kept a close watch over them. Justo was keenly aware of this danger. For example, in another piece, “Diálogo Semi-serio” (no. 25, December 18, 1852), Congo informs his master that *El Ponceño* will die because “someone” does not like the way the journal is going. This “someone” is undoubtedly influential in the Island’s affairs, because Justo defends his “innocent” newspaper, pointing out the valuable public service it performs for the Puerto Rican community: “Como ha de morir un inocente papel que se esfuerza en divertir, en difundir las noticias y avisos de los tribunales y de los particulares, que de otra manera era difícilísimo?”

Justo adds patriotic, religious and moral arguments to this plea, obviously addressed to the military authorities: “Un periódico puramente Español, y que en sus columnas hay a menudo artículos de moral y religión, que es la base de las sociedades, ¿tú crees que muere un periódico solo porque rematarlo? ¿O por el deseo de que se muera? No, Congo que encima de los matadores y la víctima hay una autoridad a la que ellos no pueden, allí resplandece la justicia y no da oído a las malas pasiones.” There is irony in this plea, but there is also anxiety, because the military authorities could invoke the slightest pretext to impose a fine or close down a newspaper, which actually did happen with *El Ponceño* a year and a few months later.



Finally, in “Cosasvarias y un sueño” (number 36, March 5, 1853), Congo narrates his dream in which he and his master have returned from Australia with a lot of wealth. When they arrive in Ponce, they find that the local people have become equally rich and that neither London nor Paris could measure up to their town. The largest and most luxurious edifice was the one housing their magazine, *El Ponceño*. Congo starts dancing with joy, but his master tells him to calm down, because such dreams may make him lose his sanity. The obvious implication is that such dreams are pure utopia in the context of the island.

Equally preposterous appears another of Congo’s dreams: that of racial equality in “Diálogo,” no 73, November 19, 1853. In this dialogue, Congo wants to go to church to pray for the Spanish queen and says: “los negros que hemos tenido la dicha de nacer en estos dominios, somos españoles y no cambiaríamos este noble dictado por todo lo que hay en el mundo. En nuestros corazones se alberga la lealtad, y no sería yo el primero de mirada, que defendiera los derechos de mis reyes. La reina Isabel, mi amo, es la reina querida de los españoles y blancos y negros todos la adoramos.” Congo’s argument that the Black slaves are as loyal to the Crown as their white masters is again double-edged: on the one hand, this was obviously not the case; on the other hand, it could have been the case if they were freed and had the same civil rights that the whites did. But, the author implies, this was nothing but pure fantasy in the colonial context of the Island.

The foregoing examples amply demonstrate that Vilardell uses his fictional characters to criticize Spanish colonial practices. In this regard, I agree with

Villagómez that “La descentralización de la identidad de Pablo/ Congo simboliza la resistencia de este sujeto dentro de este espacio colonial” (Villagómez 2005, 56). We have seen, however, that Congo/Pablo fulfills many other functions as well and cannot be reduced to a postcolonialist critical cliché. Villagómez’s approach is very much in line with the postcolonial, sociological studies of slavery, which rarely take into consideration the complexity of the literary works that deal with this topic.

Such sociological studies are certainly useful in pointing out the psychopathological harm that comes from colonialism and other types of social injustice, for both the colonizer and the colonized, or more generally, for both the oppressor and the oppressed. But, they often endorse social violence or revolution as a remedy. In this they follow the position of Haitian sociologist, philosopher, and revolutionary Frantz Fanon, with his very influential books such as *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) or that of Malcolm X in North American culture. Villagómez equally cites Fanon, for example, to the effect that “la actuación (performance) del sujeto está en función de su subalternidad porque es ‘One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves different with a White man and with another Negro.’// That this self division is a direct result of colonial subjugation is beyond question.” (cited in Villagómez 2005, 82) She seems to endorse Fanon’s position that violent resistance was and is the only way of emancipating the “colonial subject” from its subaltern position.

Recent history, including that of postcolonial countries, shows, however, that



advocating social violence does nothing but perpetuate the same violent mentality of power, simply reversing the “dialectic of master and slave,” instead of transcending it. In this sense, the nonviolent position of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King is, to my mind, a much more effective way of seeking social justice for all. Be that as it may, Vilardell does much more with Pablo/ Congo than just dramatize “la resistencia de este sujeto dentro de este espacio colonial.”

From the few examples that I have presented, and there are many more, we can glean into the complexity of Pablo/ Congo’s character and his playful and ironic interaction with his fictional master. Pablo/ Congo plays Sancho Panza to his master’s Don Quijote. He is Robinson Crusoe’s man Friday and Rousseau’s noble Savage.

He is a trickster and a Briar Rabbit, but he is also the good counselor – a Black Puerto Rican version of Ann Landers or Dear Abby. Furthermore, Congo and Vicente, as directors of *El Ponceño*, belie any clichés about the Black slave’s ignorance, irresponsibility, laziness, and drunkenness, dispersing any doubt that the readers might have entertained about their superior abilities.

In turn, Vilardell, through Pablo/ Congo and his other characters, engages in a double game with his white Spanish readers: on the one hand, he shows the corruption, hypocrisy, cruelty and irrationality of the colonial system, including slavery; on the other hand, he combines humor, gentle irony and satire with moral outrage to appeal to his readers’ conscience, urging them to put an end to these morally bankrupt, oppressive social practices.

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