"La carne oscura de Fe": Enfleshment and Subjectivity in *Fe en Disfraz*, by Mayra Santos-Febres

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Abstract

Aligned with the proposal of Sylvia Wynter in "Human Being as Noun? Or Being Human as Praxis? Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn: A Manifesto" (2007), Mayra Santos-Febres used fictional storytelling to uphold new modes of being in *Fe en Disfraz* (2009). In this novel, Fe Verdejo is an Afro-Venezuelan historian working in the United States who activates connections with enslaved female ancestors when she finds some of their personal belongings and writings. This article analyzes the story of Fe (Faith, in English) as an example of fictional storytelling that challenges historiography and opposes the dehumanization of black females. *Fe en Disfraz* explores history and suffering, key elements in Western philosophy's delimitation of humanhood, to uphold black subjectivity. It portrays ancestry and spirituality as crucial elements to contemplate black womanhood. Being mindful of contextual differences, I put Santos-Febres' representation of black womanhood in dialogue with scholarship on black subjectivity, like those of Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, Sylvia Winter, Alexander G. Weheliye and Michelle Wright. Beyond a debate on power and oppression from the standpoint of those who are marginalized in these discussions, both as subjects and contributors, I add to an ongoing examination of the role of creative literature in reevaluating academic knowledge production.

Key words: *Fe en disfraz*, Mayra Santos-Febres, Afro-Venezuelan, Black Studies, Black Diaspora, Womanhood, Xica da Silva, Slavery, Afro-Brazilian

Introduction

Literature is still a site of provocation in which knowledges are played out, tested, confronted. Its creative essence, fluidity, and even disregard for notions of truth and falsehood that complicate literature's validation as knowledge within traditional epistemologies. Positioning creative literature's unruliness in dialogue with established knowledge is precisely the intention of this essay. Through an analysis of Mayra Santos-Febres' *Fe en Disfraz* (2009), I review debates on blackness and subjectivity, hopefully complicating these notions. *Fe en Disfraz* narrates the story of Dr. Fe Verdejo, a black Venezuelan historian who works with documents produced by enslaved women in Latin America. While working with this material, Fe establishes a spiritual connection with her ancestors. As an interrogation of history and historiography, *Fe en Disfraz* allows us to see creative literature as an important site of knowledge production that can engage with established scholarship on dismantling neocolonial ways of knowing and being.

This article realizes that with *Fe en Disfraz*, Mayra Santos-Febres contributes to ongoing debates that are at the core of Black Studies, like the rewriting of the past and the meanings of (not) being human. Moreover, the author does this within the liberty granted by creative literature. Dialoguing with narratives that uphold black subjectivity can defy dehumanizing accounts, like much of the traditional historiography on slavery. Dehumanizing accounts work as powerful tools to divest nonnormative formations from humanity by forging a superior model of human while also producing disposable surplus population of "not-quite-humans and nonhumans" (Weheliye 3). Conversing with black storytellers can create cooperation to dismantle exclusive notions of humanity and imagine spaces where nonnormative formations can fully exist.[1]

Initially, I draw the concept of subjectivity from Michelle Wright in *Becoming Black* (2004) and Steve Biko in *I Write What I Like* (1996). In her investigation of black subjectivity in Western thought, Wright explains subjectivity "*as that which must be negotiated between the abstract and the real*" (3, author's italics), and draws from Henry Louis Gates and Paul Gilroy concept of subjectivity that is "responding to Black experiences in the West" and therefore is not "limited to a particular national, cultural, and linguistic border, or produced in isolation from gender and sexuality" (4).

Writing from the perspective of an anti-apartheid militant in South Africa, the term "black consciousness" defined by Biko serves as basis for the concept of subjectivity, as evidenced in the following passage: "Black consciousness is in essence the realization by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation—the blackness of their skin and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude." (49). Despite the male-centered definition, Biko emphasizes the role of collective identification and resistance to racial subjugation, which is similar to how subjectivity is implicitly outlined by other scholars, activists and communities.[2] As I show in this article, the sense of self based on identification, community, resistance and history, also informs Santos-Febres' framing of subjectivity in *Fe en Disfraz*. The author's representation of black women's subjectivity illustrates what Sylvia Wynter (among others before and after her) explained as "*being human as praxis*" (9, emphasis in the original):

> … it is by means of our cosmogonies, or origin-stories that we tell the world, or ourselves who we are, we are able to do so only because it is also by means of them, that we are enabled to behaviorally auto-institute and thereby performatively enact ourselves as the *who* of the *we* (or fictive mode kind) that we are. (9, emphasis in the original)

Wynter makes explicit the triad language, myth, and genetics for the constitution of human, adding that being human is not solely a noun but a verb as it is praxis.[3] If being human is praxis, that is, the enactment of an idea of what means to be human, then reimagining peoples, reimagining places, times, humanities, and relations can effectively contribute to establishing black people's humanity and subjectivity. Creative literature is a site where reimagining new modes of being takes place, where language and myth are actively combined to fulfill the proposal of new cosmogonies and histories. However, if representation of historical beings is a form of domination through discourse in which the Other can be essentialized via linguistic representation (McClintock 27-28), which reformulations can transform literature from a master's tool into a tool for liberation (Lorde 53)? What is in "el misterio que es Fe" (92) that allows us a new understanding of subjectivity?

As suggested by Wynter, part of asserting subjectivity lies in poetics, in storytelling. In other words, storytelling is a discursive practice that enacts being in the world. Katherine McKittrick describes it as "the practice of narratively-experimentally-empirically-neurologically knowing and telling our worlds" (70). Wynter goes further as to claim that "the defining characteristics of our hybrid human origin" is "*the fully completed co-evolution, with the human brain, of the faculties of language and of storytelling*" (72 author's italics). Working on myth, language, and genetics engendered through storytelling, is precisely the effort of Mayra Santos-Febres in *Fe en Disfraz*, as the plot is a conflation of these ideas. Fe Verdejo, the protagonist of the novel, is described as a prestigious Afro-Venezuelan historian on slavery in Latin America. Fe's findings consist of letters filing legal complaints against abuse (usually sexual assault) of enslaved women and girls. Santos-Febres used real historical accounts in the narrative, and the brutality they describe will be reenacted by Martín, her assistant, and Fe in sex rituals (Rangelova 151). While Martín, a white Puerto Rican, is the main narrator of the novel, the direct transcription of the letters of enslaved black women allows for a shift in the narrative perspective, however, it is still Martín who is choosing, showing, and interpreting this material.

Fe also finds a gown that belonged to Xica da Silva, the fictional character based on Francisca da Silva de Oliveira (c. 1732 - 1796), known as Chica da Silva. Silva was a former enslaved black Brazilian woman who lived in the 18th century, and became famous for having a romantic relationship with the governor of her province with whom she had fourteen children (Furtado 301). In fictional narratives, Silva is turned into a myth: while her story is a fact, her sexuality is imagined as lustful and the result of witchery, which is the usual explanation for how she was able to remain in a stable romantic relationship with the most powerful white man at that time.

Fe en Disfraz starts with Martín preparing himself for an October 31st ritual with Fe years after their first sexual encounter. It was Halloween in Illinois, where the characters are, and eve of Día de los Muertos in Latin America, where they are from. Fe wore the dress of Xica da Silva, which caused her to experience what Martín calls a metamorphosis. The narrator's description of the scene suggests that Fe can incorporate spirits of deceased enslaved women in Latin America through a deliberate sacrifice: the iron structure that is part of the dress hurt Fe and made her bleed.

The story of Dr. Verdejo generates questions on race, gender, sexuality, history, storytelling, myth, sacrifice, violence, law, and (de)humanization in the creation of discursive techniques to assert subjectivity to gendered and racialized bodies. In this essay, I touch on how each of these concepts are presented in *Fe en Disfraz* and how they become elements in the establishment of black enslaved women's humanity. Working with theories that recognize the humanity of marginalized populations is fundamental to my exploration of new modes of being in literature. Therefore, black feminist scholarship on the deconstruction of normative models of being informs my analysis.

"El tiempo no existe y todo lo que existe es tiempo"

Fe leads a sexual ritual with Martín every October 31st, and this temporal repetition points to a cyclical movement and to the importance of time in *Fe en Disfraz*, as the following passage makes evident:

> 31 de octubre. Se supone que hoy, esta misma noche, se abra una brecha en el tiempo. Que, justo a media noche, presente, pasado y futuro se fundan en uno. Los ancestros familiares y los animales, los descendientes perdidos en el humo, volverán a formar el hilo que conduce la Historia. Entonces, y solo entonces, el chamán podrá recitar lo vivido como una encantación. Decir el cuento y que signifique. Atisbar el futuro de su especie. (106)

As Western traditional philosophy considers time and history crucial elements in the delimitation of what being human means, the representation of these in Santos-Febres' novel demands attention. Firstly, it is important to consider the impact of different temporal logics on the black diaspora. The documentary series "Brazil: DNA Africa" (2015) brings an interesting example of this impact. The purpose of the series was to investigate the African origins of Afro-Brazilians through DNA analysis. While fifty people had their samples sent to the United States to be examined, only five participants were the focus of the five episodes. They had the chance to visit communities in Africa from which their DNA suggested genetic connections.

The most problematic aspect of this documentary is the belief that genetic material can accurately tell one's origins, which ends up reviving genetic determination, an expression of the early twentieth-century scientific racism, and oversimplifying ancestry. On the other hand, the show also works through the damages of acculturation and the erasure of history. When enslaved people arrived in Brazil, they were separated from others with whom they shared the same language and culture. This separation would force them to learn the colonizers' language and complicate dissent, and also force enslaved people to take on new names. Another practice aiming at the erasure of history that is highlighted in the documentary, is the ritual of circling the *Baobás*, the forgetfulness tree three times—enslaved people were forced to complete to disremember their names, cultures, languages, and peoples (Silva 130)[4]. The practice of renaming efficiently erased familial ties, and my own last name, dos Santos (as well as other popular surnames in Brazil, like Silva and Oliveira), does not point to connections or history beyond slavery. We are millions and we usually do not know anything about our ancestry and origin beyond two or three generations. The forgetfulness tree becomes a stronger image when associated with the denial of black people's subjectivity. In *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1837), Friedrich Hegel wrote on the slavery of Africans using a dialectical method in which the enslaved person's subjectivity exists in relation to the master. Thus, enslaved people would only gain consciousness and strive for freedom once enslaved. Highlighting the importance of reason, Hegel states that the opposite of Man, "the state of Nature," "is therefore, predominantly that of injustice and violence, of untamed natural impulses, of inhuman deeds and feelings" (40-41). Slaves would be able to attain subjectivity by an antithetical relation with their master. According to this line of thought, slaves were not Man because they did not have reason, state, and existed outside history. Slaves inhabited a state of nature while subjectivity had to be achieved (Wright 35, 80).[5]

Fe en Disfraz defies these ideas. In the novel, white males inhabit the state of nature as they are the ones assaulting black women and girls. As for time and history, Walter Benjamin's critique of historical materialism and linearity can shine a light on how Santos-Febres disrupts traditional knowledges on being human. Instead of a linear and progressive time, Benjamin acknowledges that time performs a cyclical movement (IX, XIII). Since linear history is preferred in historical materialism, according to Febres' narrative, glitches (as the recurrent October 31st) in this linearity enables access to different temporalities. In traditional historiography, the cyclical movement that departs from barbarism is fated to repeat itself reproducing the original barbarism. In the Benjaminian notion of barbaric progress, material historicism is refuted based on the unbreakable connection between past tragedies and historical movement (IX). Thus, if the historical continuum has a barbaric event as a

departure point, a positive evolution becomes impossible. Consequently, what we receive in the present are the outcomes of catastrophic events, like the violence of racism as slavery's legacy. If every "artistic monument" is a result of barbarism, as Benjamin states, it is unlikely that more violence will not be propagated through literary works.

As hopeless as the implications of the Benjaminian analysis may be, a new beginning, a new history seems to be the only solution for breaking the cycle of barbarism. As the turns around the forgetfulness tree may be necessary for a clean start in linear history, a cyclical history does not allow forgetfulness, but compel us to reckon with the past before moving on. Perspective is also crucial in this new narrative, for if the barbaric history is the history of colonizers, a new standpoint is essential for new histories. A complex change in perspective within a cyclical time is precisely the main intervention in *Fe en Disfraz*.

As Fe, an Afro-Venezuelan historian, unveils the narratives of enslaved women, black women become active producers of history rejecting a submissive position as objects. History is not only constructed in the past, during slavery, it is also being discovered, produced, summoned in the present through Fe's findings, research, rituals, and lived experiences. History, therefore, is more than a narrative but rather an element of connection between subjects in different temporalities. Fe accesses linkages that historiography erased representing women as historical agents, and therefore, within the parameters of humanity set by traditional Western philosophy. Moreover, Santos-Febres practice of storytelling challenges history. In this process, she imagines new beginnings in which barbarism is fully acknowledged, as such, storytelling in these circumstances allows for the possibility of transgression and recreation.

"Que se acoge a la piedad del Gobernador y a su amparo real"

In Santos-Febres' (re)imagination of history, the artifacts that Fe finds are fundamental. Among these objects, Xica da Silva's dress and the official documents advocating for enslaved black women are the concrete pieces linking the past with the present, and generate deeper connections between the black women in the narrative. For the most part, the documents "transcribed" in the novel are testimonies that enslaved people would give to authorities requesting legal intervention and, among other problems, "Relataban estupros y forzamientos con lujo de detalles. Su contenido sexual era particularmente violento" (Santos-Febres 22). One example is the second document that appears in *Fe en Disfraz* registering the testimony of two enslaved women, Petrona and María. The account starts with the sexual assault they suffered when arriving in Costa Rica on an English slave ship: "tres

gendarmes entraron en María, uno por delante y otro por detrás, mientras otro le ponía su vergüenza en la boca hasta casi ahogarla" (39-40). María and Petrona tell their story to ask for the governor's intervention so Petrona can buy the freedom of her son, conceived as a result of the sexual assault and sold as a slave. Her mistress, Cecilia Coronado, had suddenly increased the price they had previously agreed on.

According to Lamonte Aidoo, testimonies like the one provided by María and Petrona were "given in a climate of fear and intimidation" (8), which requires an evaluation of the context when analyzing these documents. While Aidoo is focusing exclusively on enslaved people's testimonies to the Catholic Inquisition in Brazil about same-sex rapes, the documents the author analyzes has striking similarities with the denunciations that Santos-Febres recuperates or imagines. One of them was the detailed narration of sexual assault, necessary to decide who was the guilty party. The use of a third person was also the norm for those transcribing these testimonies which oftentimes resulted in language manipulations that casted doubts on the culpability of masters. Despite the horrific crimes enslaved people denounced, it was rare for a slave owner to be convicted. Moreover, the enslaved person giving the testimony could be returned to the perpetrators and suffer retaliation (Aidoo 33).

María and Petrona employed notorious tools to establish themselves as subjects, as humans before the law, namely, writing and suffering. As a symbol of enlightenment, writing confers the power to transform stories in historiography when combined with temporal distance. As a master's tool, however, it is relevant to ask about its potential to dismantle the master's house (Lorde 53). Audre Lorde's statement has some contextual implication that is relevant here, as the author was referring to knowledge production and representativeness in which the absence of other non-normative identities cannot generate liberating knowledge. As such, the master's representation and own knowledge will not yield self-incrimination. Lorde's statement resonates with Aidoo's observation that the written testimonies of enslaved people provided in a legal setting would not result in justice and could even generate more violence against those who risked their lives to seek legal protection.

As enslaved women, María and Petrona are not considered human beings, rather property without claims to the law though they manifest their complaint into a defiant act of resistance. They are in fact illustrations of bare life (Agamben 8) or "flesh," as proposed by Hortense Spillers (67). Spillers discusses the "theft of [Black] bodies" (67) through the exercise of four imposed traits that I clearly see in María and Petrona's account. According to Spillers, in the new world "the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality" (67). It also becomes "*being*" for the master; "the captured sexuality" is turned into an expression of "otherness"; it is translated into

"pornotropics" and the embodiment of "powerlessness" (67). From these starting points, Spillers framed her concept of flesh as central to captive subject-positions. Since the body requires ownership, she describes flesh as a "zero degree" or "primary narrative" containing "undecipherable markings" that compose the "hieroglyphic of the flesh." (61). It is something that exists before the body and is invested with experiential marks that precedes it.

The characters María and Petrona understand that their suffering (or its written register) might humanize them by justifying their appearance before the law. The complicated representation of suffering to achieve personhood status has been one of the main subjects of Black Studies since its institutionalization, as exemplified by the work of Saidiya Hartman and Alexander Weheliye. Drawing from Wendy Brown, Alexander Weheliye writes that claims to suffering is "a consequence of the state's dogged insistence on suffering as the only price of entry to proper personhood" (77). For Saidiya Hartman, the insistence on representing black suffering is evidence of the "precariousness of empathy" (19), which refers to the necessity of exposing and reenacting pain so that those who control the terms of personhood can empathize enough to see the other as human. The testimony of María and Petrona, for instance, make their suffering visible to reach empathy and not necessarily subject status, as suggested in the last sentence of their letter and the title of this section: "Que se acoge a la piedad del Gobernador y a su amparo real" (40). More than a way into personhood, empathy is a plea to the continuous desire of white supremacist patriarchy to be acknowledged as the only (humanizing) power. It is the power of "administration of bodies and the calculated management of life" (44) as explained by Michel Foucault, the power to stop bare life or the flesh's suffering, or the biopower to "make live or let die" (62) that María and Petrona believe they can appeal to.

There is subject status achieved by María and Petrona, but this is accomplished only through the narrative itself (through storytelling) in an interesting metalanguage dimension. It is the temporal movement of the document they produced, the valuation of it by Fe, a gendered and racialized subject, that imbues María and Petrona with subject status. The transformation of this document in history by a renowned scholar turns it into written proof of humanity. The fictionalization of this "history" ultimately questions the silences and gaps in official history and invites the readers to fictively reopen and fill these spaces.

Both *Fe en Disfraz* and the work of scholars on the question of black humanity help us understand the ways in which normative ideals of Man force nonnormative formations to claim personhood through problematic ways. This work also imagines alternatives, including the refusal to fit into categories of humanity altogether. Location is another source of concern for these scholars, as

the most popular epistemologies on black humanity are produced in the Anglophone world (if not, from a Global North perspective). When applied blindly to the experiences, cultural artifacts, and knowledges from the Global South, there is the risk of reenacting imperialistic behaviors. Boaventura de Sousa Santos discusses the problem that he refers to as "epistemicide":

> The West, or global North, claims the right to the dominant view of the world. But, on the other hand, the global South is entitled to have its own view of the world (and of the global North). It should come as no surprise that between these two views the differences are so vast that they seem to refer to different worlds. (45)

Mayra Santos-Febres, a Puerto Rican author teaching at the University of Puerto Rico, seems aware of the problem that Santos addresses. Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States without any actual political representation in the United States Congress.[6] It is relevant that Martín, the single Puerto Rican character in *Fe en Disfraz* identifies as white and is uncapable of stopping the violence that he inherited and sustains. The character presents some parallels with the history of the territory, like the white colonizing violence and the impossibility to stop it. Beyond representing aspects of the Puerto Rican condition, *Fe en Disfraz* utilizes travelling artifacts and knowledges to portray the black diaspora as transnational and in movement. However, the objects that Fe includes in her project will exist in similar conditions to those who produced or used them: at the University of Chicago, they become another body brought to the North, although they have physical and metaphysical manifestation in people of color's bodies, as I show subsequently.

"La carne oscura de Fe"

In *Fe en Disfraz*, Martín narrates a series of rituals that summons history into the present. They mostly involve physical injure and blood. Patricia Valladares Ruiz understands the rituals between Martín and Fe as performative consensual sadomasochists (S/M) practices where "el cuerpo sufriente … arrastra un dolor del pasado hasta el presente" (599). While intercourse in the narrative attests to the importance of physicality, it is also a channel to establish a metaphysical connection between Fe and the women she represents in her project, as Martín suggests:

> Me imagino, por ejemplo, cómo veré a Fe mutando ante mis ojos. Se convertirá en cortesana haitiana de los tiempos de Henri Christophe, en la mismísima Xica Da Silva, en todas esas mujeres negras, trasplantadas por un extraño curso del azar (y de la Historia) a ese traje, a esa otra piel. La veré también como Fe Verdejo, la insigne historiadora, esclava de su tormento. (113)

Scenes of S/M are prevalent throughout the whole book. In one of the first scenes, for example, Martín describes how he makes a cut on his penis while masturbating. The act is a reenactment of women's menstruation, which, by its reoccurrence every month, has a strong association with time passage, a central element in the narrative. Fe submits herself to similar practices during rituals that encompass the opening of flesh and the shedding of blood. However, the most significant part of their rituals is Fe's physical transmutation achieved when she wears Xica da Silva's gown. Fe found the heirloom in a convent where a dying nun told her own story before guiding the historian to the dress. The only request the nun made is that the gown should never be returned to the convent. In the first time alone with the dress, Fe wears it cutting herself with its iron structure. She drinks the small amount of blood that her cut sheds, so it does not stain the dress and enjoys it. Later, wearing Xica da Silva's gown becomes a recurrent ritual between Martín and Fe, and every time the dress is worn, Martín talks about Fe "transmuting" into all the black women "transplanted" into the gown.

As Xica da Silva's gown connects Fe and black women who endured slavery, spirituality becomes a crucial dimension in *Fe en Disfraz*. The suggestion that the dress can summon the spirits of other women signals to various similarities between the experience of Fe in the narrative and the animists religions of African origin in Latin America and the Caribbean—*Vodou* and its variations, and the Afro-Brazilians *Candomblé* and *Umbanda*. In these religions, spirits that inhabited bodies in the past survive death and are summoned into living bodies in the present. As a child, I would frequently visit *terreiros de Candomblé* (Candomblé's temples) with the women in my family and later with friends to witness orishas celebrations. My favorite part of the ceremony was listening to people who had incorporated spirits in their bodies of "cavalos" (horses), talking about mythical pasts and foreseeing the future of those present. They were establishing a link between three temporalities: past (from where they come from), present (where they are materialized), and future (that they foresee). These ceremonies also required dressing each cavalo with the vestures of the entity to be incorporated (without discriminating among gender differences), music and animal sacrifice. Each of these entities identified as black, which had much more appeal to me than the whitened figures of Christianity.

Fe en Disfraz' spiritual dimension adds to the theories on subjectivity that I previously cited. In the narrative beyond the physical, metaphysical connections are also engendering personhood,For instance, on discussing violence in the colonization and decolonization process in Algeria in the first chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon dismisses the religious values of "the colonized subject" as "terrifying myths that are so prolific in underdeveloped societies" (18). However, he also acknowledges the role of religious practices in creating identity and preserving tradition and history.

In Fanon's words: "In terrifying me, it [the atmosphere of myths and magic] incorporates me into the traditions and history of my land and ethnic group, but at the same time I am reassured and granted a civil status, an identification." (18)

Aza Weir-Soley explored the importance of spirituality in the literature of black women authors, and their representation of "black female characters as both sexual and spiritual beings" (2). The scholar explains that Western religions usually distance body and spirit and have rituals molded specially to break this connection (2-3). The Christian baptism is a good example. While the recently Christianized soul is purified, the body is submerged in water symbolizing a rupture where the soul can be uplifted when the body dies. Religions of African origin emphasize the strong connection between spirit and matter. Without disregarding the many differences in every branch of the religion and even from temple to temple, core practices of *Candomblé* involve, for instance, bodies that receive orishas and sacred physical activities: dancing, drumming, singing, eating, smoking, drinking, greeting and clapping. Animal sacrifice encompasses another important sacred activity in Candomblé. The very incorporation of deities entails bodies being possessed and penetrated by another spirit. Oftentimes, cavalos receive entities with different gender identifications than their own. Each entity has a unique biography—while one is the beautiful lady of the rivers, the other is the prostitute who is proud to receive and give pleasure, able to openly discuss sexuality. Fe and Martín engage in rituals that remind me of Candomblé, performing offerings, as Martín calls them (14), and invoking a transcendental connection between female racialized bodies and the histories that mark these bodies, between spirit and the physical world, pleasure and pain. Like Candomblé, the characters' rituals show an "interdependency between spirituality and sexuality that is central to the formation of black women's identities" (Weir-Soley 3), adding another dimension to how *Fe en Disfraz* establishes subjectivity.

As the embodiment of masculinity and colonization in the narrative, Martín limits the imagination of nonnormative subjectivities. He talks about himself in the following terms: "Me encuentro de una blancura vulnerable … No me queda más que esa blancura que es mi herida. Fe me lo ha hecho ver, la herida que habita en mi piel." (21). He acknowledges his "blancura" and his arousal to black women's pain as a problem. Under these circumstances, he cannot avoid but colonize the female subjects he encounters in the narrative. He describes himself as a "cazador frustrado" (17) and a slave of his desires emphasizing his problematic position as the narrator who hyper-sexualizes black women across time to the point of animalization. His narration causes serious restrictions to the readers who can just see Fe's story through Martín's eyes. This constraint inflicts colonizing violence on black bodies, but also to the historiography restricted to his perspective. For instance, Martín

cannot comprehend how to cope with his intense sexual desire while reading stories that should cause repulsion: "No sé cómo yo, Martín Tirado, me trasmutaba en ese terrible ser de colmillos expuestos, de mano agitadora de cursores y de carnes pudendas." (45). It seems to be evident that the narrative requires Martín and readers to share the position of spectators, voyeurs of the horrendous accounts in the letters.

Martín's position in relation to the enslaved black women whose bodies he lusts after is better understood through Spillers' concept of pornotropes discussed by Weheliye in the following terms: "Pornotroping unconceals the literally bare, naked, and denuded dimensions of bare life, underscoring how political domination frequently produces a sexual dimension that cannot be controlled by the forces that (re)produce it." (90) In this sense, if not for the awareness of his position and the clear implication of the readers in this process, having Martín as narrator would reobjectify the black women whose stories he is telling. Through Martín, Santos-Febres highlights the perils of the "Western" eyes and male gaze to the establishment of black female women's subjectivities. In addition, the fact that Martín is the narrator, even though Fe is the historian responsible for the project on enslaved women, questions the possibility of history to be ever produced and disseminated out of the white male gaze's reach.

The male gaze is also present in the story of Fe through the fictionalization of Francisca da Silva de Oliveira, known better as Chica da Silva, the real former enslaved woman who lived in Brazil in the 17th century. Silva's existence is tied to her relationship to her romantic partner the Governor of Arraial do Tijuco, João Fernandes de Oliveira. As explained by Júnia Ferreira Furtado, Chica da Silva's public relationship to a white man made her into one of the few enslaved women to enter history in Brazil. Her popularity generated the film "Xica da Silva" (1976) directed by Cacá Diegues, and a soap opera with the same title directed by Walter Avancini and broadcasted during the years of 1996 and 1997 in Brazil (12). In these productions, Xica is the main source of legends based on imagined and stereotyped uncontrollable sexuality of black women. The usual explanation for an enslaved woman to marry a powerful white man is Xica's sexual lust and witchcraft. Therefore, it is very significant that Santos-Febres chose to complicate her portrayal of Fe and Fe's embodiment of Xica (with this spelling) by keeping Martín as the narrator who continuously hyper-sexualize Fe and other black women. Martín's narration signals to the perils of the white male gaze muddying the role of readers in this relation. Readers who uncritically engage with the white male gaze can become complicit in a process of reduction of Fe into "la carne oscura de Fe" (16) or just flesh.

According to Rangelova, Fe does not conduct the narrative, but she controls Martín and the relationship between them inverting power hierarches (156). However, his narration undermines Fe's power and is one of the main sources of violence in the novel. Violence against women is an endemic problem in several countries and its literary representation deserves attention. Sexual intercourse with Martín happens whether Fe is wearing Xica's dress or not, although they seem to only engage in S/M practices when the historian is "disguised." Following Weheliye's logic (98), I find striking similarities between Fe Verdejo and the character Mona/Shola from *Sankofa* (Dir. Haile Gerima, 1993). Fe's mutation from modern day prestigious historian into enslaved character when she wears Xica da Silva's gown is also a transformation from body into flesh. While Shola is dispossessed of agency and abused, Fe seems to be compelled by those who possess her body through consensual, violent sexual acts. A historical power imbalance marks their sexual encounter translated as "the grammar of pornotrope—the cross fertilization of violence and sexuality" (Weheliye 102), or a master-slave encounter in which flesh is sexually dominated. Weheliye adds that white characters in *Sankofa* "desire the flesh: the flesh that they, as selected master subjects, supposedly transcend and can therefore not inhabit" (111). As the embodiment of masculine white colonial power in *Fe en Disfraz*, Martín cannot help but try and control via violent sexual conquest the manifestations of enslaved black women that Fe incorporates.

The problem of representation in *Fe en Disfraz* can be summarized through an important question: What are the losses that the narrator, performing "uncontrollable" sexual acts that are violent, cause to a story that acknowledges black female personhood, agency, and resistance? Despite considering the letters from enslaved women as an alternative for the male gaze, the eroticization of their testimonies by Martín (and the implication of readers in this process) can jeopardize claims to full subjectivity.

Conclusion: "Rompe el traje, desgárralo, sácame de aquí"

Mayra Santos-Febres' *Fe en Disfraz* corroborates the idea that black women's subjectivities transcend the parameters of Man's identity. Despite the limitations of Martín as narrator, Santos-Febres' novel is a meaningful performance of Sylvia Wynter's idea that storytelling can engender new ways of being and new worlds. The author's creative writing also contributes to debates on significant elements in the (de)construction of Man, for instance, writing, law, history, violence, and suffering. The problematic manifestation of pornotrope through the representation of violence can threatens the full realization of black women's subjectivities. In *Fe en Disfraz*, the collective identity that Michelle Wrights

highlighted in the construction of black women's subjectivity surpasses a historical connection among characters in different temporalities. This linkage is rational but also metaphysical, mystical, mythical, and corporeal. Figures of the past that function as active connections to individual and collective histories of suffering and resistance, haunt (or bless) the present engendering new ways of being. Haunting also manifests the way Martín reenacts white colonizers and slave owners' practices in what he claims to be an uncontrollable behavior. Fe's cry in the closing of the novel: "Rompe el traje, desgárralo, sácame de aquí" (115) signals to a desire to break with the embodiment of these histories. Her request then, points to questions that demand further exploration: How are new genres of being possible when we are still haunted by violent pasts that are constantly finding ways to materialize in the present? Is haunting an asset or a burden in the assertion of black female personhood?

Notes

[1] The expression "fully exist" refers to existing without the constraints imposed by societies that are historically structured under a model of a human being who is white and male, among other characteristics that show privilege. "Fully exist" implies a state in which aspects of one's identity do not condition rights to care, security and decision making.

[2] Examples are Abdias do Nascimento's *Brazil, Mixture or Massacre?* (1979) and "The Combahee River Collective Statement" (1977).

[3] In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire also relates being and praxis in the achievement of education for liberation when he says: "Para *ser* tem que *estar* sendo." (70) 'In order to be, one needs to enact being' (My translation).

[4] In *Francisco Félix de Souza, mercador de escravos*, the historian Alberto da Costa e Silva calls these turns around the forgetfulness tree a "tradition" (his quotation marks) used to unlink enslaved people from their past lives (130). In the documentary, the forgetfulness tree is identified as the *Baobá*.

[5] In *Becoming Black*, Michelle M. Wright explains Hegel's ideas on slavery as follow: "Hegel determines the Negro as all that is Other to the European, the very antithesis to the European subject by lacking consciousness, and then recommends his continued enslavement … Hegel has already made clear that this progression [from the state of nature to subject] has not occurred in Africa, only one option remains: the African will attain subjectivity through the European." (35)

[6] One discussion on the political situation of Puerto Rico can be found at https://harvardpolitics.com/puerto-rico-colony/

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