

## Race/Class/Language: “El Negro” Speaks Cuban Whiteness in the *Teatro Bufo*

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An important phenomenon within nineteenth-century Cuban popular culture is the presence of white actors (or writers) in blackface portraying blacks with widely varying, yet always problematic, forms of speech. This phenomenon includes representations of pseudo-intellectual black Cubans, among them versions of the *negro bozal* and the *negro catedrático*. I analyze examples of these figures through some of the popular theatrical genres in which they appear: the immediate precursor to the *teatro bufo*, and especially the *teatro bufo* itself (a genre of Cuban blackface comedy akin to U.S. minstrel shows) and a sub-genre of the *bufo* known as *negro catedrático* plays. Specifically, I look at Fernández Vilarós’s *Los negros catedráticos* trilogy, and Sánchez Maldonado’s later *bufo* entitled *Los hijos de Thalía*. Examining the intersections between racial identity, class relations, and language – the hierarchization of linguistic registers based on conceptions of “proper” or “authentic” language and associated personal qualities – sheds light on the dynamics and function of these representations. Though written and staged within a thirty-year period, the two works display very different manifestations of the same race/class/language nexus. I seek to understand how Cubans, as witnessed in these two plays, shift from ridiculing and rejecting blacks for not being able to speak “properly” to ridiculing and rejecting blacks precisely for speaking “properly.” I find that the explanation lies in the interplay between the Afro-Cuban figures and the figure of the (white) Cuban intellectual and his/her linguistic and cultural authority. Through this interplay white Cubans, and primarily those of the lower and middle classes, use the Afro-Cuban to speak, to convey through linguistic register and to generally express, white Cuban identity.<sup>1</sup>

In the first pages of a 1961 collection of *bufos* a sort of “Advertencia al lector” alludes to a particular challenge of approaching nineteenth-century popular Cuban theatre: “El Teatro Bufo es un teatro para ver; no para leer. Para ver tipos y gestos y bailes. Para oír la música criolla, ligada al Bufo, de ruidosa llama” (Feijóo 1). Today it is impossible to access the sights and sounds of this cultural form.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, I attempt to study it by focusing on the pieces of the puzzle that we do have: the written words of those plays that have been published,<sup>3</sup> references to the plays in the writings of the period, the elements of staging about which we do know, in particular the use of white actors in blackface for all black roles, and the class structure that in general made it such that these plays were performed in secondary theatres and primarily for lower and middle-class audiences.<sup>4</sup> Thus, I investigate the symbolic power of language (the representation of dialects, linguistic registers, and grammar itself) and its relationship to the use of blackface and the largely working-class white audience, to elucidate the role of conceptions of language in the construction of Cuban identity.

In the 1840s Bartolomé José Crespo y Borbón developed the figure that would become central to the *teatro bufo*: *el negrito bozal*, a recently-arrived African who speaks a pidgin form of Spanish known as *macuá* or *bozal*. A *bozal* is literally a muzzle; thus, the term *negro bozal* reflects the perception of the recently arrived slave as incapable of speech, or at least as muzzled by his/her inability to speak Spanish. Significantly, the play by Crespo that first established the figure of the *bozal*, and concomitantly the white vision of black speech, was published the same year as Andrés Bello’s *Gramática de la lengua castellana destinada al uso de los americanos* (1847).<sup>5</sup> What might seem to be a mere coincidence of dates in fact points to a coincidence of ideologies.

Grammar, with a capital G, governs early and mid-nineteenth-century Latin American intellectual projects, and nowhere more clearly than in the writings of Andrés Bello. Bello’s *Gramática* sought to create linguistic uniformity throughout Latin America, as a response to his fear that with time the language of the region would turn into “una multitud de dialectos irregulares, licenciosos, bárbaros; embriones de idiomas futuros....” This fragmentation would then present “estorbos a la difusión de las luces, a la ejecución de las leyes, a la administración del Estado, a la unidad nacional” (Bello IV:12). Likewise Bello believed that language, and its perfection in the humanities, served to enhance morals and civic virtue. As Julio Ramos explains in *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina*, during this pre-

*modernismo* and early modernization period a concept of literature structured by rhetoric still reigned as central to the project of rationalization. Regardless of their area of expertise, intellectuals conceived of language as “la autoridad común de la *elocuencia*” (Ramos 41). Grammar is not simply a record of usage, but rather a normative mechanism that supplies “las leyes del *saber decir*” (46). Thus Grammar does not refer merely to syntactical correctness, but rather to the linguistic and cultural authority that legitimates certain speakers and endows them with distinctiveness in the cultural marketplace. As Bourdieu argues, “What is rare... is... the competence necessary in order to speak the legitimate language which, depending on social inheritance, re-translates social distinctions into the specifically symbolic logic of differential deviations, or, in short, distinction” (55).

In the specifically Cuban context, the presence of indigenous and African linguistic elements, as well as the fact that the island was still a Spanish colony until the end of the nineteenth century, intensified the pursuit of cultural distinction through language found elsewhere in Spanish America. As a result, in mid- to late-nineteenth-century Cuba we find two interwoven, and at times contradictory, projects: the effort to defend Cuban Spanish (and American Spanish in general) vis-à-vis the Spanish of Spain, which included the distinction between cultured and uncultured Cuban Spanish, and the effort to demonstrate the existence of a national language and literature.<sup>6</sup> This period thus saw the beginnings of Cuban linguistic study, and these works generally subscribe to two commonly held ideas: the notion that linguistic change is a corruption of a pre-existing purity and the belief that language reflects the character of a people, a nation.

Marlen A. Domínguez Hernández and Ana María González Mafud find a group of constants in the works of the first Cuban intellectuals to write about linguistics. Among these are the didactic aims and normative character of the works, in which grammar is understood as a regulatory and prescriptive discipline (“Postrimerías” 174). Various Cuban thinkers of the period, among them Antonio Bachiller y Morales and José Martí, admired Bello’s scholarship in linguistics and in particular his *Gramática*.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Bello and various Cuban thinkers coincide in their conception of the roles of the common speaker versus the expert, cultured speaker.

Bello opens his *Gramática* by defining the grammar of a language as “el arte de hablarla correctamente, esto es, conforme al buen uso, que es el de la gente educada” (Bello IV:15). Elsewhere Bello specifically and clearly states the consequence of deeming the cultured Castilian of the Latin Ameri-

can upper-class as the proper form of American Spanish: “En las lenguas como en la política, es indispensable que haya un cuerpo de sabios, que así dicte las leyes convenientes a sus necesidades, como las del habla en que ha de expresarlas; y no sería menos ridículo confiar al pueblo la decisión de sus leyes, que autorizarle en la formación del idioma” (Bello IX:438-439). This hierarchical positioning of the intellectual as the arbiter of “pure” language, the discipliner of the unruly tongues of the *pueblo*, is echoed among Cuban intellectuals of the second half of the nineteenth century such as Bachiller, Manuel Sanguily, and Rafael Montoro. For instance, José de la Luz y Caballero, in his discussion of the proper education of children in *Escritos educativos*, expresses the idea that low educational levels lead to linguistic corruption: “Los criados no saben hablar con propiedad, y así estando vosotros [los niños] siempre con ellos, no solamente adquirís mil resabios en la pronunciación, sino hasta en el uso de las palabras” (59). This conviction leads him to declare that “Para que el niño sea bien hablado y comedido, es necesario que frecuente el trato de la gente fina y bien criada” (59). Given that in Luz y Caballero’s time most Cuban servants were of African descent, in his comments we find an implicit connection between race and the ability/inability to speak correctly. In Bello’s influential work as well as that of these intellectuals, language is clearly the domain of the (white) *letrado*. As Bourdieu notes, “the legitimate language is a semi-artificial language which has to be sustained by a permanent effort of correction” (60) and, at this moment in Cuban cultural history in particular, this task belongs to the *letrado*. The *letrado* provides the model for proper language (a standard that establishes the Castilian of Spanish America as equal to that of Spain), and has the authority to legislate, to evaluate and correct the language use of others.

Following the same linguistic criteria that Bello and Cuban intellectuals espoused, in the 1880s Cuban theatre critics passed judgment on the *teatro bufo* because of its “lenguaje bastante chabacano y grosero” (Tolón 30). Aurelio Mitjans, one of the critics Tolón mentions, won Havana’s 1886 Certamen de las Conversaciones Literarias with the essay “Del teatro bufo y de la necesidad de reemplazarlo fomentando la buena comedia.” In this essay Mitjans decries the vulgarity and bad taste of the *bufos* and their lack of any redeeming artistic value or edifying message. Among the various shortcomings that he finds in the *teatro bufo*, he criticizes that the actors appear on stage “hablando mal é hilvanando disparates (cosa más fácil que hablar con elegancia y gracia)” (Mitjans 57). The lack of *el saber decir* and its (carefully crafted) eloquence contributes to the *bufo*’s intolerable inad-

equacy. Along similar lines, linking issues of language and what is judged as “low-brow” taste, Rafael Montoro, in his prologue to a collection of essays by Mitjans, bemoans the fact that “el público prefiere una corrida de toros ó una zarzuela abillantada por los impuros realces de la música orgiástica, ó del género bufo, á las obras dramáticas más celebradas y á las más sublimes creaciones de Beethoven ó de Wagner” (XI).

These conceptions of language and “tasteful” cultural production reflect the tensions between Cuban *letrados* and members of the Cuban lower and middle classes. While Jill Lane rightly states that “through the *catedrático*, white audiences delight not only in making fun of socially pretentious black people, but in the pretentiousness of aristocratic Spanish culture itself” (“Blackface Nationalism” 37), the white audience was not a homogeneous group. As Lane herself points out, the *bufos* seem to have drawn patrons from a few different classes of white Cubans, including manual laborers and artisans as well as members of the well-off professional classes such as merchants and bankers (Lane, “Blackface” 31). Although at the height of *teatro bufo* popularity free blacks and members of the aristocracy were also in attendance (38, n. 26), typically blacks were not allowed to attend (or were limited to the most far-flung seats)<sup>8</sup> and the elites (both the ruling Spanish class and the *criollo* plantation-owning oligarchy) only frequented operas and zarzuelas at the more elegant theatres such as the Teatro Tacón. These groupings reflect divisions not only between white and black Cubans, but also between white Cuban wage-earners (whether of the laboring or commercial classes) and the land-owning Cuban aristocracy, to which most Cuban *letrados* belonged. Thus, we cannot simply divide the nineteenth-century population of Cuba into blacks/mulattos, white *criollos*, and Spanish colonial rulers. Rather we must consider the divisions among *criollos* between the working and commercial classes and the largely elite Cuban intellectual class, and more broadly the realms of financial and monetary versus humanistic concerns.

At the same time we must keep in mind that the articulations of a Cuban language and identity that took place within nascent Cuban nationalism interconnect with a particular racial dynamic. Cuba’s system of slavery created considerable racial paranoia about the “Africanization” of the island. On the one hand, whites on the island lived in fear of slave insurrection. On the other hand, the particular system of slavery in place produced a sizeable urban population of free blacks, thereby augmenting fears of black conspiracies and of loss of control over cross-racial contact. In the first half of the

nineteenth century, anxieties about the rising black and mulatto population of the island and the potential for revolt and black control (with the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1803 taken as an ominous warning) produced a climate of racial fear. This negrophobia rose sharply in the 1840s with the events of La Escalera.<sup>9</sup> After the abolition of slavery in 1886, while political apprehensions regarding black organizations arose at certain points, other concerns remained constant: anxieties about racial classification, contact and contamination.

This climate of racial anxiety, however, coexisted with the need to define a specifically Cuban culture in order to further the anti-colonial movement. Emerging nationalist sentiment led to various cultural expressions of *lo cubano*, including *siboneísta* poetry, the anti-slavery *costumbrismo* of the Del Monte literary group, the comical representations of Cuban types in popular theatre and print media, and the development of a Cuban musical style. These cultural expressions belong to the broader Caribbean and Latin American phenomenon of *mestizaje* that Kutzinski aptly describes as “a peculiar form of multiculturalism – one that has circulated... as a series of discursive formations tied to nationalist interests and ideologies. This multiculturalism acknowledges, indeed celebrates, racial diversity while at the same time disavowing divisive social realities” (5). Thus, in Cuba, over the years various social sectors, including at different times popular media and the government, have promoted *mestizaje*, or more specifically *mulatez* (mulatto culture and the image of a mulatto populace) as the alternative to black-white tensions, and even as the nation’s “true” identity. However, the *de facto* social system is not one of equitable diversity or fusion, but rather one of hierarchy. At best this results in nationalist appropriation, that is, utilization by *criollo* nationalism in its pursuit of a distinct Cuban identity. Indeed most of the Cuban forms of *mestizaje* have been comprised of varying types and degrees of discursive and performative appropriation of African cultural forms. This is particularly salient in Cuban music and dance (which arose out of the fusion of Spanish and African popular forms in addition to some European art forms) and in the use of this music and dance in popular theatre.<sup>10</sup>

Popular Cuban theatre played an important role in Cuban nationalism, both in terms of *costumbrista* elaborations of Cuban identity and of the expression of anti-Spanish sentiment. In the case of Crespo’s work, literary histories regard him as the source of the stock character of the *negrito bozal* and as a key figure in the development of Cuban musical styles. Yet, at the same time debate surrounds the extent of his nationalist expression, and

even his support of Cuban independence.<sup>11</sup> The accounts that portray Crespo as a Cuban patriot reflect a desire to narrate the origins of the *negrito bozal*, and of Cuban theatre in general, in a very specific way. They reflect the desire for purely Cuban, that is, nationalist and anti-Spanish, roots for Cuban theatre. They also suggest the desire to sacralize as patriotic the appropriation of black speech, music, and dance on the Cuban stage. The role of *teatro bufo* itself both in the *costumbrista* construction of Cuban identity and the expression of anti-colonial sentiment is even clearer. In *teatro bufo* as a whole one finds a strongly self-conscious *costumbrismo* as well as unequivocal nationalist rhetoric. Likewise, traditional assessments of the *teatro bufo* tend to suggest the attitude that the appropriation of black modes of expression is not only unproblematic, but patriotic.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, blacks were generally considered, by virtue of color, to be of a lower class and of lower intellectual capabilities.<sup>13</sup> That is, they were usually seen as incapable of producing proper language according to the standards of *Gramática*. Nevertheless, the key figures and representative plays I examine here point to the lack of fixed correlations between race, class, and language status. Rather, the categories of difference interact according to the identity-building needs of the white audience. In the *negro catedrático* and *bufo* plays the possibility arises of blacks being culturally white (speaking and perceiving the world like whites) but this distinction between cultural and biological race is manifest in different ways according to the on-going self-fashioning of lower and middle class whites. Thus, the discursive and performative appropriation of black cultural forms in Cuban theatre includes, in addition to Afro-Cuban music and dance, white representation of blacks (their forms of speech and attitudes) for the purpose of further delineating a specific white identity.

Although for brevity's sake I do not analyze in detail Crespo's earlier representations of black speech, and pseudo-intellectual black speech, some discussion of his work is essential. Crespo's *bozal* pieces generally center on the interplay between stock characters speaking a range of dialects: *el negrito*, *el gallego* and *la mulata*, among others. Besides the *negrito bozal* and the other figures Crespo represented within his plays, the authorial persona that Crespo created is of paramount importance. Crespo wrote his first *bozal* play, as well as various other texts, under the pseudonym of Creto Gangá. Through this pen name Crespo published his works as if actually written by a recently arrived African, that is, a *bozal* himself. For this reason, Lane aptly describes Crespo's relationship to Creto Gangá as "dis-

cursive blackface” (*Anticolonial Blackface* 65). Crespo developed this blackface pseudonym into a textual, blackface character in its own right: the figure of the pseudo-intellectual *negro bozal*.<sup>14</sup> Lane points out that Creto Gangá “sits at the intersection of several major social discourses in mid-century Cuba: white race panic, abolitionist activism, and *criollo* anticolonial sentiment” (Lane, *Anticolonial* 111). I submit that we must add language, and interwoven class issues, to this group of significant social discourses with which Creto/Crespo engages: the emerging concern with distinguishing between Cuban versus Peninsular Spanish, and, moreover, with distinguishing between correct versus uncultured Cuban Spanish. Crespo creates a pseudo-intellectual *bozal* in order to offer white Cuban audiences the opportunity to affirm just how ludicrous the idea of a *bozal* as a man of letters is.

In this way, Crespo’s work does not point to a divergence in attitudes toward correct language vis-à-vis Bello’s *Gramática*, but rather a diversity in the mechanisms used to establish the difference between correct grammar, understood as rational capacity, and broken speech taken as a sign of a lack of intellectual capacity. While Bello, Luz and others among the men of letters who also had a public, institutional role in society sought to establish order, to catalogue and control the chaos of the Americas through the written word, Crespo’s plays and other writings featuring Creto Gangá find humor in the chaos. They can be read as providing a foil for correct speech and an ordered society. That is, they can be seen as furthering the cause of Grammar (specifically the interest in differentiating between Peninsular and Cuban Spanish, and, within that, regulating correct Cuban Spanish) by ridiculing that which lies outside of it, the pidgin of the *negrito bozal*.

Crespo’s representation of the good-natured and ridiculous Afro-Cuban later became a stock character in the *teatro bufo* that was wildly popular during 1868, and from 1879 through the 1930s. The original Teatro Bufo theatre company brought together elements of the *bufos madrileños* and the local stock characters of the *negrito* and the *guajiro*, to create parodic plays that highlight music and dance forms that were popular on the island. These plays were an important part of the assertion of Cuban (versus Peninsular) culture that typically fused *criollo* and African elements in an effort to develop and/or demonstrate an independent, distinctive national culture.

Significantly, the pairing of Afro-Cuban and intellectual seen in Crespo’s Creto Gangá continues, albeit in different form, in a particular character in the *teatro bufo*. This character is the *negro catedrático* or black



professor who for a time has his own sub-genre known as the *negro catedrático* plays. In 1868 Francisco Fernández Vilarós inaugurated the *teatro bufo* with a *catedrático* play that debuted at the Teatro Villanueva. In response to the play's popularity, within months he produced a second and third part to form the trilogy known as *Los negros catedráticos*. These plays and others like them formed the *negro catedrático* sub-genre that featured black characters speaking with hyper-correct speech. The so-called "black professor" of the *catedrático* plays is a free, urban black who fancies himself a cultured intellectual. The *catedrático* and quasi-*catedrático* characters are distinguished by their use and misuse of academic jargon and grammatical and scientific allusions, the main source of humor in the plays. In *bufo* plays in which there is no *catedrático*-esque character, the verbal humor is produced through puns and the misrecognition of phrases (e.g.: a character hearing "en llamas" instead of "te llamas" [Anonymous, *Don Centén* 65]). In contrast, in the *catedrático* plays in addition to this type of word play there is a mockery of "high falutin," hyper-correct speech. In the plays by Fernández Vilarós in particular, the *catedrático* characters' speech is not only bombastic and verbose, but often, in the attempt to be grandiloquent, actually incorrect. If the figure of Creto Gangá, an *inculto* who humbly tries his hand at the activities of men of letters, is ridiculous, the only thing more ridiculous is an *inculto* who thinks he is a *letrado*. This is precisely the persona that emerges in the *negro catedrático* plays of Fernández Vilarós.

In Fernández Vilarós's *Los negros catedráticos* trilogy the pseudo-intellectuals are contrasted by a *negrito bozal*, who conveys the honorableness of staying in one's place and being "authentically" black. At the start of the first play in the trilogy Aniceto and Crispín, the two lead *catedráticos* discuss their plans to marry their daughter and son to each other. In the course of their discussion, these Afro-Cubans refer to recently arrived Africans as foreigners ("esos desgraciados seres de los extranjereros climas de Africa") who lag behind culturally: "¡Lástima me da su incultura y el grado de brutología en que se encuentran, en comparancia de nuestros conocimientos científicos!" (I:i: 24-29).<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Aniceto's daughter Dorotea finds José, the *negro bozal* of the play, to be so beneath her that she considers his marriage proposal hilarious. Laughing, she calls her father out to meet José so that he may entertain himself ("para que tuvieras un divertimento") with "[el] caballero congo" who has asked for her hand (I, viii, 17-19). Dorotea displays the relationship toward José that underlies the whole genre of *teatro bufo*, that of a superior spectator entertained by an African/Afro-Cuban

whose very existence is a source of amusement. Her father reflects the common social attitude of rejection of any intermarriage: Aniceto snubs José by saying that he is not of the same class or condition. José's reaction presents the outward, though ultimately undercut, message carried by the trilogy of plays:

ANICETO: Porque ninguno de mi prosapia formará alianza ofensiva ni defensiva con ningún negro heterogéneo sino con los de su claise y condición.

JOSE: (*Incómodo*). ¿Tó no só negro?...¿No?...¡Criollo, lucumí, carabalí, gangá, arará, congo, toitico, toitico só negro! ¡Negro toitico! (I, viii, 229-234)

In the next scene, José, alone on the stage, complains that the black *criollos* think they are better than Congos because "negro criollo... toca violín y pone casaca..." (I, ix, 243). The dialogue between Aniceto and José and José's short monologue transmit the outward message of the play: not only are all blacks the same, but those who are "true to their nature," who admit that they are black and accept the attending social position, are better (more trustworthy) than those who aspire to whiteness (to cultural whiteness via high language or wealth or to visual whiteness via intermarriage with lighter blacks or whites).

The storyline of the trilogy also makes this message very clear: Aniceto and Dorotea's hypocrisy and shallow interest in intellectual prestige is revealed when they find out that José is rich and instantly break off Dorotea's engagement to Don Crispín's son and marry her to José. In the second play we find that Aniceto and Dorotea have tried to use José's economic capital to give him cultural capital. But after spending nearly all of José's riches on trying to educate him, they only succeed in transforming him into a speaker of "bozal catedratismo."<sup>16</sup> In the third play of the trilogy Aniceto and José are struggling with how to rein in José and Dorotea's son, Hércules. Hércules has been even less successful and less interested than his father in picking up *catedrático* ways and has become a *cheche* or *curro*, a man of the streets who makes his living through petty crime or trickery. When Aniceto is blaming José for the waywardness of Hércules, José gets fed up and declares:

JOSE: ¿Qué la vá disí yo? Que ya cansá de todo ese cosa matemático y rumboso; que ma vá pa la muelle; que yo no só ma aritocrático; que ya no quiere viví en esa mósfera físico; que ya ta burrí de toitico

presopopeya, y que donde ahuro yo só otra vé congo y trabajaore la muelle (III, iv, 115-19)

This scene seals the image of José as the African who knows that he is African, the character with a good heart who recognizes that Aniceto the *catedrático* is hypocritical and frivolous, and, worst of all, is ridiculous in his attempts to move up the social-racial ladder. The plays convey the explicit message that blacks should stay in their place, be true to their “authentic,” ignorant yet hard-working ways rather than pretend to be white.

But it was actually whites who played the roles of these blacks (who want to be and speak white) and these actors performed before an almost all-white audience. What can this doubly-inverted performance tell us about what lower and middle class white Cubans wanted to believe about Afro-Cubans? The trilogy of *negro catedrático* plays only offers three social roles or identities for Afro-Cubans: the *congo bozal*, the *cheche* and the *catedrático*. And these actually collapse into only two subject positions: the “authentic” *congo bozal* or *cheche* and the “inauthentic” *catedrático*. So while the plays affirm that no black can truly be cultured or have the values of the elite, they also present Grammar, correct speech and the paired capacity for logical thought, as inaccessible to all blacks, no matter what their education or place of upbringing (Cuba vs. Africa). In this way, race and language are linked. Language, like race, is seen as part of Nature, as an inherited, intrinsic characteristic, and thus only whites, those of “pure” blood, have access to pure language.

In contrast to Bello and other intellectuals who sought to control the chaos of post-independence Latin America through the ordering of the written word, the *catedrático* plays (like the *bozal* plays) uphold *Gramática* by ridiculing that which lies outside of it. Yet they also clearly revel in linguistic cacophony. To what extent are they actually a Bakhtinian, carnivalesque release from the control of *La Gramática*?<sup>17</sup> In this period of transition from the dominance of humanistic values to that of a utilitarian economy, did popular cultural forms align themselves more with one than the other? Although education could theoretically grant working- and merchant-class Cubans a dominant position within the *República de letras*, the realities of elitist humanism made that very difficult even for whites. On the other hand, though, the “Republic of use-value and economic gain” did not check for pedigree at its borders and there was a chance of gaining a favorable social position there. Certainly this ongoing conflict appears within the *negro catedrático* trilogy. The characters of the three plays try to be white in their identification

of themselves as cultured, their discrimination against other blacks, and their speech; but they are imitations, “bad” copies of the eloquence of the true *letrado*. Not only are they unable to be truly cultured, but they are actually more interested in quick social ascent through money.

Certain elements of the plays would suggest that the white working-class audience was using the black characters to celebrate an alternative grammar in order to establish their own authority, perhaps even to challenge the project of modernization, the attempts at ordering their world; however, the plays’ storyline and the closing of the trilogy contradict this reading. At the end of each of the three plays Aniceto, speaking directly to the audience, presents a closing verse. In the first two of these the use of the word “gramática” with a possessive pronoun could suggest the *catedrático*’s appropriation of Grammar – of the laws of correct speech and logic, of the very authority to establish a grammar. That is, these two plays could be read as a contestation of the authority of the well-spoken elite. At the end of the first play Aniceto tells the audience: “No soy más que un catedrático, / Que busca con *su gramática*, / Elíptica y sistemática, / La rígida clave técnica (I, xx, 656-661, emphasis added). And then at the end of the second play: “Diré con gozo espasmódico, / Que por físico y metódico / *ha triunfado mi gramática*” (II, xiv, 385-384 and 394-396, emphasis added). However, in the final part of the trilogy the closing statement to the public proclaims the failure of Aniceto’s *gramática*: “Basta por hoy. / ... / Que ya el término retórico / De mi alcurnia sistemática / *Lleva al hoyo mi gramática* / Y mi estilo pitagórico” (III, xvi, 498-510, emphasis added).

Thus the plays, while considering the symbolic power of culture versus the material power of money, present José the *bozal* as the one who knows the “truth”: all blacks are the same. Much as the black *criollo* tries he can not have access to *La gramática*, only to “su gramática,” which in the end fails to yield power. This conceptualization of blacks vis-à-vis *Gramática* upholds whites’ privileged access to culture and power. The white audience was clearly caught between two value systems; nevertheless, they stood to gain more distinction if they aligned themselves with *Gramática* and its linked humanist ideals. If only whites could be *letrados* and *gente culta* (while whites and blacks could be economically successful), then being cultured was a more exclusive form of social distinction than economic success. The lower-and-middle-class white audience constructed its imaginary superiority by attempting to identify with the *letrados*; thus the desire for

social status made the *catedrático* plays more sympathetic toward humanist ideals and linguistic authority.

However, the *teatro bufo*'s initial heyday (in 1868) soon came to an abrupt end. In January of 1869, cries of pro-independence sentiment in the midst of performances in the Teatro Villanueva led to the Spanish colonial authorities carrying out a massacre in the theatre and then banning the *bufos* from Cuba. The *bufo* companies and playwrights quickly went into exile in other parts of the Americas. After the return of the *bufos* in 1879, the *catedrático* character nearly disappears, replaced by "el guapo del barrio,"<sup>18</sup> a *cheche* character like that of José and Dorotea's son Hércules. The discussion above supports the interpretation that the *catedrático* plays fulfill white desire for a racially-based privilege, one that is confirmed by the laws of eloquence. Yet, while the broader genre of the *teatro bufo* with its *negrito* character was popular into the late 1930s, the sub-genre of plays representing a ridiculous black pseudo-intellectual who uses and misuses academic jargon disappeared in the 1880s with the *catedrático* character subsequently only appearing occasionally within the *teatro bufo*. How can we explain the *catedrático*'s near-disappearance?

Grammar and racial identity once again create unsettling ambiguities for the primarily white lower and middle class audience. Although the *negro catedrático*'s pseudo-intellectual speech makes him ridiculous, at times he displays a scholarly wit that could be out of reach for some members of the audience. For example, the main *catedrático* character, Aniceto, tells José that his marriage proposal is accepted and Dorotea's other suitor is "a thing of the past": "Ese lance de honor que con tanta presopopeya llevó a efecto, me ha convencido que es Ud. un gerundio y que el otro no era más que un pretérito pluscuamperfecto de indicativo" (I, xiv, 401-04). This pseudo-erudite word play displayed by a black character, as well as the direct and indirect invocation of Grammar throughout the plays, poses a threat to the white audience members since they themselves were speakers of non-standard, lower class, or standard but not learned, middle class, Cuban Spanish. This insinuated that their speech and level of culture was positioned equal to, or even lower than, some forms of black speech in relation to the eloquence of the *letrados*. It suggested that *Gramática* was just as inaccessible to them. For the less-educated members of the audience, the dynamics of *Gramática* made it such that the more erudite word-play of the works, rather than clearly distinguish whites from blacks, ultimately called into question that difference.

Here I would like to return to an important scene in the first play, in which this linguistic and cultural link between whites and blacks is brought to the fore. I referred above to a scene in which José, the *negro congo*, tries to point out to Aniceto that all blacks are equal by telling him: “¿Tó no só negro?... ¿No?... ¡Criollo, lucumí, carabalí, gangá, arará, congo, toitico, toitico só negro! ¡Negro toitico!” (I, viii, 229-34). Aniceto counters this assertion of a racial identity that unites the *congo* and the *catedrático*: “¡Pero hay una paridad tan grande como de La Habana a Fernando Póo!...” (I, viii, 235-36). Thus, he tries to create an analogy between the pair *negro congo-negro criollo* and a pair that he sees as complete opposites: Havana and Fernando Póo. But this comparison that is supposed to highlight the differences between the two places and thus all Cubans (black and white) and Africans is ambiguous. Fernando Póo was the name of an island province of Equatorial Guinea that as a Spanish colony was closely tied to the slave trade. Thus, rather than presenting two pairs of clear antonyms and thereby emphasizing the contrast between the two locations, this analogy serves as a reminder of the historical, commercial and cultural links between West Africa and Cuba. This in turn undermines not only Aniceto’s defense of the difference that separates him from José, the *negro congo*, but the message of racially-based identity that José is supposed to carry. By invoking Havana in its entirety and not an Afro-Cuban community within it, white Cubans are also brought into the comparison: they are reminded that Fernando Póo is a part of Havana, of every Cuban regardless of color. This inextricable link only points out the ultimate futility of any attempt at establishing the black Cuban as radically Other.

Recall that the audience was watching this ambiguous enactment of difference performed by whites playing blacks who “play” at being white. I propose that this last step in the linguistic and racial “cross-dressing” of the plays highlights the performativity of race to a degree that may have become uncomfortable for white Cubans as they contemplated independence from Spain and their status as the demographic minority on the island. Thus, the plays ultimately also remind this audience of their own troubled relationship with *Gramática*, social class and race. In Eric Lott’s work on the North American minstrel shows, he points out that their ambivalent vulgarity was “aimed at a racial structure whose ideological and psychological instability required its boundaries continually to be staged, and which regularly exceeded the dominant culture’s capacity to fix such boundaries” (27). Similarly, in the case of the *catedrático* plays, the unstable, contingent racial and social hier-

archies that the plays sought to shore up and affirm, in the end, spilled over, uncontrollable. While Crespo's audience could easily feel clearly superior to Creto Gangá and his *bozal* brethren within the plays, audiences of the *catedrático* – with their own interest in being cultured and speaking correctly, and also rising in the economic hierarchy – might see themselves on the stage too easily. Thus, the inaccessible authority of eloquent speech, that is, the symbolic power of *Gramática*, explains both the rise and virtual disappearance of the *negro catedrático* plays.

Although entire plays centering on various *catedrático* characters did disappear, *bufo* plays featuring one or two *catedrático*-type characters did continue to be written and staged. As the cultural context of the *bufos* changed so too did the type of *catedrático* and his function in the plays. The clearly carnivalesque *Los hijos de Thalía* is a later *bufo* play in which a *catedrático* character appears. Written and staged in 1896, this play is presented as *Los hijos de Thalía o Bufos de fin de siglo*. Desconcierto antiliterario, cómico-bufo-lírico burlesco y mamarrachero en verso y prosa, en un acto y tres cuadros, original de Benjamín Sánchez Maldonado." This meta-theatrical piece relates the staging of a play, "El Lucumí," that is specifically an "ópera bufo catedrática" (244).

The self-referential play features one *catedrático* character who is also the only black character in the play. Severino is the impresario and director of the play-within-the-play and his goal is to put on a cultured play that overcomes the vulgarity of the *teatro bufo*:

SEVERINO: Voy a regenerar el género, y cual otro Sancho Panza voy a revolucionar el mundo artístico. El arte está muy alicaído. El teatro bufo ya no es teatro; es un abigarrado conjunto de multicolores matices sin la harmónica medida que embellece el conjunto indispensable para la forma estética del arte y la apariencia radiante del buen gusto afiligranado.... Señores el argumento del "Lucumí" es interesantísimo. Está escrito con sentido común. No hay un solo chiste grosero. Todas las escenas están justificadas.... (221 and 230)

Severino is a different type of *negro catedrático*: this "black professor" speaks with very elevated, but not incorrect, speech – no dialectical pronunciation, made-up words, or incorrect morphology appear in his efforts to be hyper-correct and ultra-cultured. In *Los hijos de Thalía* the humor does not arise from the botched attempts at "high" language, but rather from the exaggeratedly complex and ornate language as well as the direct rejection of

this high language, and the aesthetic with which it is linked. This culminates in a carnivalesque toppling of the authority of Grammar and its *letrados*.

The other characters in Sánchez Maldonado's play are whites who are not property- and slave-owners, but rather actors in a "low-brow" theatre. These representatives of the lower classes reject not only the *catedrático's* high speech, but his conception of art and entertainment. Filomeno, one of the white characters who is an actor in the play "El Lucumí," makes this clear:

SEVERINO: Ya es hora de que comience el ensayo. ¿Ninguna humanidad artística se ha presentado en el marco de la puerta conductora?

FILOMENO: Cuando usted me habla en latín no lo entiendo.

SEVERINO: ¡Eso es hijo de que tus órganos cerebrales no están dotados de la fosforescencia suficiente para hacerlos asequibles a todas las ramificaciones del saber humano!

FILOMENO: ¿Ya usted ve? Ahora me habla usted en griego antiguo... Dígame claramente lo que quiera pa que yo lo entienda.  
(220)

The conflict between Severino and the white actors in his theatre company develops into a full form Bakhtinian release when the actors revolt in the performance of "El Lucumí." The actors turn the play into just the sort of "grosero" low-brow production that Severino seeks to "rise above." "El Lucumí" ends in mayhem as the police come in to arrest the actors for cheating the audience, but the actors are able to appease the audience, as well as the police, by dancing a rumba. Thus, *Los hijos de Thalía* concludes with the dominance of low-brow entertainment, the triumph of lower middle class speech and aesthetics over the high culture norms of the upper class *letrados*.

And what role does race have in this victory over the authority of Grammar? Although race drops out of the overt terms of the play, it maintains an important function. As the only black character in the piece, as well as the only character who represents *catedrático* speech and stands for high culture aesthetic goals, Severino embodies the two groups from whom the white working class seeks to distinguish itself: blacks and *letrados*. Additionally, Severino's self-identification with Sancho Panza, in lieu of Don Quijote, makes it clear that ridicule and rejection of *letrados* also includes that of Spaniards. Thus, this play conflates blackness and the high literate classes. Although late nineteenth-century intellectuals, such as José Martí,



were rejecting high rhetoric for *versos sencillos*, the *ciudad letrada* still reigned, power was still established through written media produced by an educated elite. And though at the time of Sánchez Maldonado's play modernization had opened some space for the newly literate to rise in the social ladder, this was still done by submission to the norms established by men of letters.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the white figures in the play actually rise up against high falutin' speech and aesthetics in the figure of an Afro-Cuban, suggests that the *letrado* is portrayed as black in order to open him to criticism. Working-class whites can rise up against *Gramática* and ridicule its *letrado* only when that *letrado* is presented as racially inferior.

Furthermore, *Los hijos de Thalia* employs this conflation of blackness and the high literate classes to establish a white, working-class Cuban identity. The project of forging a national identity through African-infused *criollismo* is evident in the play's rumba revolt. Yet, in this closing rumba scene, only white characters dance the rumba. This rumba is actually de-racialized in order to celebrate popular Cuban cultural forms while excluding black Cubans. Thus, paradoxically, the play establishes an exclusively white, working class identity through the rumba, an Afro-Cuban cultural product. At the same time, the play mocks a caricature of proper Castilian and presents as more authentic Filomeno's plain, unpretentious register that substitutes "pa" for "para." In this way, the play legitimates a particular form of Cuban speech – a standard colloquial considered more authentically Cuban – while rejecting the register safeguarded by *letrados*. This play, much like the *catedrático* trilogy, presents a black with high language and high aesthetics as an imposter, as inauthentic. By rejecting the high culture grammar of language and taste, embodied by an Afro-Cuban, *Los hijos de Thalia* projects the message that to speak with hyper-correction is a ridiculous black enterprise and, thus, responds to the rise in the possibility of a black Cuban being an intellectual with a strong assertion of a white working-class identity. In contrast, the play portrays the white characters, through their form of speech and penchant for the rumba, as authentically Cuban. The white audience, identifying with the white actors and their "authenticity," is given an appealing model of *cubanidad* that is accessible to them.

Written ten years after the abolition of slavery in 1886 and just two years before achieving political independence from Spain, *Los hijos de Thalia* asserts a white working class identity through the rumba, an Afro-Cuban cultural product. Moreover, in this play late nineteenth-century whites of the lower and middle classes define themselves by appropriating largely Afri-

can-derived dance and music forms as Cuban, while at the same time using blacks as a stand-in for white *letrados* and their rejected concept of proper language. Here working class white Cubans use the figure of the *catedrático*, and the intertwined discourses of race and high language of which he was a part, in order to assert their identities over and against both Afro-Cubans and the authority of the aristocratic intellectual classes.

The analysis of these plays points to the emergence of a working-class white Cuban identity that is built upon cultural appropriation as well as upon linguistic and racial rejection. On the one hand, there is the Afro-Cuban rumba that offers the white actors their triumphant grand finale in *Los hijos de Thalía*. Yet on the other hand, the plays reject the viability of a cultured black who is not a laughable *catedrático*, while also articulating either an uneasiness with the authority of *Gramática* or an outright rejection of this authority of eloquence. Not only is the appropriation and rejection of the Afro-Cuban riddled with inequities and instabilities, but it is also intertwined with the presence of the intellectual and the linguistic and cultural authority for which he/she stands. Whites carry out self-definition through the representation of blacks speaking different conceptions of improper language. This self-definition, in turn, rests on ambivalences surrounding the relationship between race, language, and nationalism. Thus the desired purely (white yet *criollo*) Cuban identity is always, even in spite of itself, intertwined with the Afro-Cuban, as well as with the (contested) definition of what constitutes true or proper Cuban language.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The most important scholarly work on nineteenth-century popular Cuban theatre to have emerged in recent years is that of Jill Lane. See Lane's dissertation, *Anticolonial Blackface: The Cuban Teatro Bufo and the Arts of Racial Impersonation, 1840-1895* and her article "Blackface Nationalism, Cuba 1840-1868." My analysis differs from Lane's in its greater attention to the role of "proper" forms of speech, and the more nuanced class groupings that this focus reveals. In this way, this essay is an attempt to build beyond Lane's important study.

<sup>2</sup> Some versions of the *bufo* spectacle may still be performed. In the mid-1980's I actually saw a *bufo* vignette live, though its particular ideological impulses enter into another realm all together. It was the opening act for a flamenco show in a Little Havana theatre.

<sup>3</sup> Many of these plays were improvised or simply not meant for publication and thus even the surviving written record is quite incomplete.

<sup>4</sup> These plays were sometimes also performed in the famous Teatro Tacón, though this certainly occurred less frequently.

<sup>5</sup> This play, first published in 1847 and first staged in 1848, is *Un ajiaco, o, La boda de Pancha Julia y Canuto Raspadura*. Although the actor Francisco Covarrubias first donned blackface and introduced (that is, appropriated) the *negrito* and his dance and music into the Spanish *sainete*, or musical theatre in the early 1800's, Crespo developed the *negrito* into a standard main character that captured audiences' imaginations and stirred up public debate.

<sup>6</sup> I use the terms "Cuban Spanish" and "Peninsular Spanish" to refer to the standard dialect (or grouping of dialects) commonly understood as "Cuban" or "Peninsular." Clearly there are many forms of Castilian spoken among Cubans and among Spaniards (and in some cases the similarities across national lines are striking), but these terms provide a shorthand that reflects the usage and conceptualization of nineteenth-century Latin American intellectuals. Likewise, I use these intellectuals' categorization of a range of dialects into two broad groupings: cultured or educated and uncultured or lower class.

<sup>7</sup> See Domínguez and González, "Postrimerías," 162, 172, 174.

<sup>8</sup> Rine Leal notes that "el sitio del 'hombre de color' como espectador, era sistemáticamente negado o relegado a las peores localidades. No es hasta finales del XIX, y gracias a la labor de Juan Gualberto Gómez, que el negro tuvo derecho a comprar una butaca en los teatros. Antes, sólo le eran permitidas la tertulia o la cazuela" (*Breve historia*, 49-50).

<sup>9</sup> A series of slave revolts in the early 1840's were understood by colonial authorities and plantation-owners as the beginnings of a widespread anti-slavery, pro-independence insurrection, known as the conspiracy of La Escalera. Violent repression of blacks ensued.

<sup>10</sup> See Lane's insightful discussion of "musical nationalism" and the relationship between popular theatre and the development of Cuban music (*Anticolonial Blackface*, Chapter 2).

<sup>11</sup> Historians of Cuban theatre such as González Curquejo and Arrom present Crespo as a very Cubanized Spaniard (Crespo arrived from Galicia at age ten) who used the *bozal* dialect in theatre pieces (Arrom, *Historia de la literatura dramática cubana*, 61) as well as articles (González Curquejo, *Breve ojeada sobre el teatro cubano al través de un siglo (1820-1920)*, 14) to criticize the colonial Spanish government. They assert that Crespo used *bozal* speech, because it would probably only be understood by *criollos*, to get around the colonial authorities' heavy censorship and express pointed anti-Spanish criticism and pro-independence sentiment. However, Leal argues that none of the surviving plays even remotely suggests that this was the case. He asserts that, on the contrary, the available documents indicate that Crespo was actually a royalist (*La selva oscura*, 275). See also Lane, *Anticolonial Blackface*, 109-10.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, when Tolón notes that theatre critics of the 1880's criticized the *teatro bufo* for its "low" language, rather than deconstruct the underlying criteria of such criticisms, Tolón joins these critics in their censure of the "vulgar" language of the *bufos* and in their assessment of this register of language as a sign of the *bufo*'s decline. Yet Tolón also strongly defends the importance of the *teatro bufo* as a popular national form, one that brought to the stage "los ritmos seductores de nuestra música popular y argumentos en pro de nuestra independencia" (*Teatro lírico popular de Cuba*, 31). These seductive rhythms are in fact mostly African-derived musical styles. Thus, once again, we encounter within Cuban cultural historiography the recurring desire to narrate an autochthonous theatre that is nationalist and anti-Spanish and finds its originality in the appropriation of African cultural forms.

<sup>13</sup> There was a small number of Cuban *litterateurs* and intellectuals of African descent during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. However, they generally faced many obstacles created by the island's racial ideology and exacerbated by colonial rule. The life stories of Francisco Manzano and Plácido (Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés), as well as the framework in

which their writings have been interpreted, is a testament to this. See Kutzinski for a revision of traditional understandings of Plácido's work. Lane discusses the figure of the Afro-Cuban politician within an 1894 *bufo* play in *Anticolonial Blackface* 362-81.

<sup>14</sup> For more on Creto Gangá, including debates with him in the press, see Mary Cruz, *Creto Gangá*, and Lane, *Anticolonial Blackface*, chapter 1, as well as Leal, *Breve historia*, 45-46.

<sup>15</sup> I use this notation to refer to Play I of the trilogy, Scene i, Lines 24-29.

<sup>16</sup> The following are examples of José's "bozal catedraticismo": "Aniceto se ha domiciliado en bodega ese de la esquina concéntrica.... Yo no púe guanta sulfuriamente el calórico de casaca ese" (II, iv, 110-111 and 119-20).

<sup>17</sup> In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin presents his concept of the carnival square, a space in which decorum is eliminated, hierarchies are inverted, and there is a popular, group ridicule of official/high culture. The carnivalesque, thus, represents a stance of disdain and mockery of official culture.

<sup>18</sup> See Leal, *Breve historia*, 79.

<sup>19</sup> See Rama, *La ciudad letrada*, 71-81.

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