

Tropicalizing the Netflix Empire: Neocolonialist Renderings of Afro-Cubans on *Sky Rojo* and *Toy Boy*

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Abstract

The recent success of Netflix España as a producer of high-quality content with a global fan base has put a spotlight on contemporary Spanish society as a modern, progressive, and racially diverse, European nation-state. However, an increased visibility of racial minorities also raises questions of how Blackness and Latinidad are wielded in popular Spanish series as tools to maintain racial hierarchies. In order to flesh out these ideas, this article analyzes the representation of two Afro-Cuban characters from two of Netflix España's most popular series, *Toy Boy* and *Sky Rojo*. This cross-examination of two Black characters, male and female, will demonstrate that colonialist ideologies persist in the Spanish media. A close reading of these two series reveals how racist tropes are refashioned in a contemporary setting and how Afro-Latinidad becomes commodified for a Spanish and global audiences. Thus, Spain reasserts itself as a racially distinct and superior society, while Cuba lingers in the shadow of the former Empire. By exposing these neocolonialist methods used in Spanish productions, this article will uncover the methods used by the popular media to mask racial inequality and silence the voices of racially marginalized communities.

Key Words: Neocolonialism, Visual Media Studies, Afro-Cubanidad, Race, Peninsular Studies

The tragic death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, sparked a serious of impassioned protests, rallies, and calls for political and social action across the major metropolitan areas in the United States in what some journalists referred to as “the summer of racial reckonings” (Chang, Martin, Marrapodi 2020). Among those leaders and organizations at the core of this emphatic response was Black Lives Matter, which was created in 2013 after the death of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his murderer. Seven years following the death of Martin and after a series of other innocent Black Americans were murdered by law enforcement officers, the movement took on a vital role by mobilizing supporters to take to social media and the streets, and to stand in defiance against systemic prejudices in the United States. The BLM movement had such an impact that the reverberations were felt on a global scale. Countries in Latin America and Europe that have struggled to contain the epidemic of racial discrimination joined forces with their American counterparts. Spain, a noteworthy case, saw thousands of advocates voice their opinions on social media networks and participate in a fervent march from the American embassy down to the city center (Ramos Aisa 2020). The entertainment and media industries were among the strongest voices to echo the cries of reform, including producers, directors, and actors, many of whom expressed their sympathy and concern by posting messages of support and using the BLM hashtag on their social media accounts. Some of the most internationally recognized faces in Spanish film and television, including Elsa Pataky, Mario Casas and Miguel Ángel Silvestre, set off a firestorm on Instagram as they participated in the “Blackout Tuesday” movement in support of Black victims of violence and oppression (Santos 2020). In addition to individuals in the entertainment industry, companies such as Netflix España, the most widely utilized streaming platform in Spain (Parrot Analytics 2021), contributed to the conversation by creating a category titled, “Black Lives Matters”, which highlighted the works of Black writers, producers and actors. These responses were important steps in recognizing the persistence of racial inequality, and they served as powerful calls for reflection on how racism and structural prejudice must be addressed and dealt with on a sociopolitical level. However, it inadvertently raised a pressing question that had been in a blind spot for many years prior to the protests: Has Spanish media –including television producers, writers and actors– reflected on the lack of Black and Brown representation in their own industry and the problematic roles that actors of color are continually forced to reproduce? Indeed, racial inequality in the United States is manifested in the entertainment industry, with Hollywood and the television industry frequently criticized for racist practices and perpetuating negative stereotypes of Black, Asian, Latinx and Native American communities (Beltrán, 2009; Davé, 2017; Raheja, 2010; Ramirez Berg, 2002; Smith, Choueiti & Pieper, 2015; Squires 2009). The Spanish media is as guilty as their American counterparts in creating and sustaining racism, as several academics have noted in their research, yet few within the industry have brought this issue to the fore. Peninsular film scholars such as JM Persanch, Nick Phillips, Martin Repinecz, Ana Corbalán, Raquel Vega-Durán, and Isabel Santaolalla have studied the ways that race relations operate in movies, the latter noting a considerable void in race studies when compared to gender and sexuality in film (44). Even less consideration has been devoted to the study of race on television and streaming platforms, with a few notable exceptions such as Paul Julian Smith’s sixth chapter of *Spanish Practices* in which he analyzes race and immigration in *Hospital Central* (2000) and *El Comisario* (1999), and Kathleen Connolly’s research on Eastern European migrants in *Mar de Plástico* (2015). In Smith’s chapter, he argues that television should be considered as “the true national narrative of Spain and the privileged forum for the working out of domestic issues such as ethnicity and immigration” (79). Perhaps, the historic absence of racial and ethnic “Others” in leading roles in domestic productions destined for Spanish television has limited the

opportunities for critical research. However, the rise of streaming platforms has given more screen time to Black and Brown characters appearing in internationally viewed series, thus creating more space and increasing the need to understand how racialized characters are reproduced in a Spanish televisual text for a global audience. Among those marginalized communities that have begun to appear more frequently on the small screen are characters hailing from the former colonies, including a growing presence of Afro-Latinos. Due to this sudden increase in visibility, a more critical analysis of how Afro-Latinidad is produced in a neocolonial context on Spanish television is a pressing concern. Given the omnipresence of television in the domestic market (nearly four hours of daily viewing [Smith 1, 2006]) and the international reach that streaming services have afforded the industry, there must be a greater focus on the narratives at work in these series. Most notably, it is crucial to uncover the various ways that racialized characters –Black and Brown– are represented for Spanish and international audiences, and the mechanisms that order and reproduce racial hierarchies in Spain.

This article will unpack those ideas by analyzing two examples of Afro-Latino characters on Spanish television series that have been widely viewed by Spanish audiences, and have been released on Netflix internationally within the last three years.¹ Additionally, I will look at characters on Spanish t.v. series also released on Netflix, which have been widely viewed by Spanish audiences during the same period of time. The aforementioned series were chosen due to the extensive viewership, (Scott 2021), and their international appeal. *Toy Boy* (2019) features an Afro-Cuban exotic dancer, Germán, played by the actor Raudel Martiato. *Sky Rojo* (2021) features another Afro-Cuban character, Gina, who is interpreted by the actress Yany Prado. Both of these actors began their careers in their native Cuba. By using recent examples of Afro-Cuban representation on television series, I will demonstrate how racialized tropes and colonial ideologies continue to surface despite the claims of diverse casting and a greater sensitivity to racial issues, such as those that were referenced earlier.

The conceptual framework of this article relies principally on critical race studies from the United States and Spain, Post-colonial theory, and historical studies that trace the origins and development of hypersexualized representations of Black men and women. The fact that the characters analyzed are Afro-Cuban immigrants in the former empire that once colonized their home countries requires a multifaceted approach that takes into consideration their complex and multi-layered identity. For that reason, these intersectionalities must be explored to fully appreciate the dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality that shape the Black experience (Crenshaw 1991, Hill Collins 2005). The close reading performed in this chapter borrows elements from Stuart Hall's approach laid out in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997). Here, Hall theorizes that languages are representational systems, as developed from Saussure's semiotic theory. These languages contain elements that function as signs which must be read, interpreted and decoded in order to "construct and transmit meaning" (5). In other words, representation is not a mere reflection of our existence, but rather a meaning-making process shaped by culture and language. Therefore, the analysis must look closely at the televisual text to see how the series are transmitting meaning to the viewer by locating the signs that are at play. These signs must be interrogated to reveal how they construct an imaginary of the racialized Other and how they uphold, challenge, or obscure power and racial hierarchies. I have chosen key scenes from the two series that demonstrate how Spanish cultural representations of Afro-Caribbeans solidify heteropatriarchal hegemony in a multicultural Spain, and how they sustain colonial ideologies of Black Latinos, specifically Cuban immigrants, in Spanish

1. The definition of "Afro-Latino" and who this term includes and excludes is debated by some scholars. However, I use Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores' definition in the *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (2010), which refers to "people of African descent in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and by extension those of African descent in the United States whose origins are in Latin America and the Caribbean".

society. As former colonies of the Spanish empire, their cultural and linguistic ties allow them a certain degree of inclusion and closeness, yet they are never fully incorporated or allowed to fully participate in Spanish society as their Blackness marks them as perpetual outsiders.² Not only are they “othered” in multiple legal and cultural arenas, but also portrayed in the media as sexually desirable objects for a Spanish audience, while being stripped of intellectual agency. In addition to my analysis of the two series, I will demonstrate the extensiveness of this phenomenon by briefly analyzing how Blackness and Afro-Latinidad were perceived primarily as a sexually enticing commodity by the media in the reality dating show, *Adán y Eva*, prior to the popularization of Netflix in Spain. The reaction to the arrival of a black character on the provocative show revealed how the media (newspaper, daytime talk shows, critics) interpret and recirculate neocolonial tropes of racialized “others”. In other words, the production of Afro-Latinidad on Spanish television, as well as the media response to it, created an enduring and widespread vision of Afro-Latinos as desirable, sexualized, and exotic. Even though these images have become crystallized in the Spanish imagination, spirited groups of Black actors in Spain, such as the Black View which I will discuss at the end of this article, are collaborating to challenge existing notions of Blackness.

Before delving into the analysis, I will briefly discuss some of the historical origins of Blackness in Spain and racial projects enacted during and after the colonial era, particularly as they pertain to visual culture. Racial projects have deep roots in the country, before and during the European conquest of the Americas. “Limpieza de sangre” or “Cleanliness of Blood” was a form of racial policing that prevented Jewish or Muslim converts from fully participating in Spanish society, including governmental participation and the right to emigrate to the Americas. In addition, Europeans of African descent, both free and enslaved were inhabiting the Iberian Peninsula decades before Columbus landed in the West Indies. The Spanish and Portuguese had already begun to traffic slaves from Africa and other parts of Europe in order to fuel the demand for labor in the Iberian Peninsula, as well as for their endeavors in other regions, such as the Azores and the Canary Islands (which had already been colonized by the Spanish crown) where sugar cultivation was centered. Racial projects continued in the colonies where slaves of African descent were brought to the Americas and were stripped of their freedom and forced to labor for the crown, along with the newly captured Indigenous slaves. The concept of race became a strategic tool that served as a powerful mechanism for ordering colonial societies. Jerome C. Branche affirms that race has been present in Iberian literature for centuries, reflecting the role of race in the colonies as a marker of difference. He argues that Blackness, specifically, has been branded in the Spanish consciousness as a negative concept. This was first seen in cultural productions in theater after the arrival of sub-Saharan African slaves in the 16th century. In addition to the frequent use of blackface performances by white actors, black actors were occasionally cast in leading roles, such as Juan de Mérida in *El Valiente Negro en Flandes* (Jones 30). Sporadic performances by black actors became a familiar sight for theater-goers in Spain’s Golden Age. Noémie Ndiaye notes that Spain has attempted to erase these narratives of Blackness in early Modern Spain, which she refers to as “scripts of blackness” in performance, contributing to contemporary notions of race and relations of power (3). Thus, the concept of a racial hierarchy based on skin color, as opposed to religion, was already taking shape in Spanish society as early as the 16th century.

Spain ended their distant reign over the colonies in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines when they lost Spanish-American War in 1898, yet colonialist projects continued to spread their root in Africa. Morocco became a Spanish protectorate from 1912-1956, together with

2. The term, *Hispanidad*, which was repopularized in the early 20th century by the Generación del '98 writers and frequently invoked by the Franco regime, refers to this idea of shared cultural and linguistic bonds among Spain and its former colonies.

neighboring regions that became known as Spanish West Africa from 1946-1958. In sub-Saharan Africa, Equatorial Guinea remained under Spanish control as a lucrative colony until independence was gained in 1968. At that point, Spanish colonialism officially ended. Nonetheless, new racial tension would arise almost twenty years later when Spain joined the European Union in 1986. Elena Delgado argues that after dictator Francisco Franco's death in 1975, there was a desire to become a truly European nation state that was defined by progress and a symbolic Whiteness. However, this was complicated by globalization and the arrival of immigrants from Africa and Latin America that threatened the image of White Spanishness. Thus, it became paramount to exclude them as members of Spanish society and mark the African diaspora in the peninsula as Othered (Delgado 207). And, as Paul Gilroy notes in the case of Black and Brown Brits from the former colonies, they became branded as perpetual immigrants. In the case of Spain, Afro-Cubans are confronted with the dual tension of being seen as Black and Cuban immigrants, carrying the stereotypes corresponding to these two labels.

As immigration from the former colonies increased rapidly in the 1980s, movies became the primary audiovisual medium for representing racialized communities and the tensions that followed in contemporary Spanish culture. Together with film production, television would subsequently serve as a burgeoning vehicle for highlighting the increasing racial diversity in cultural productions beginning in the 1990s. Jimmy Castro was one of the first leading Afro-Spanish actors in the series *Hermanas* (1998), and Sonia Okomo, an Afro-Spanish actress born in Equatorial Guinea, was cast in the youth drama, *Al Salir de Clase* (1999), in one of the first roles for a Black actress. The opportunities for Black actors and actresses in subsequent years were sparse, and they were frequently positioned as supporting characters who were underdeveloped and quickly dismissed. However, the arrival of Netflix as a streaming option in 2015 marked the beginning of a new era of internationally recognized series that shined a spotlight on Spain's diversity, and foregrounded the stories of Black, Latino, Afro-Latino, and other marginalized communities for the first time. One of the most salient examples is the show *Élite* (2015), which featured Black (Sergio Momo, Leiti Sene), Maghrebi (Mina El Hammani), and Latino (Danna Paola, Jorge López) actors in leading roles, all forced to reckon with their racial identity in an elite boarding school. This was also the case for two of the most widely watched series on Netflix that exposed what Lorgia García Peña calls the "multiple colonialities".³ She explains this concept and the "entanglements" of Latinx identity in *Translating Blackness* (2022) as follows:

Marked as foreign either due to their legal status and/or cultural or linguistic difference, Afro-Latinx diasporic subjects struggle to find a political and cultural place within the nation in which they reside as immigrants (or as descendants of immigrants) while simultaneously facing similar forms of racism and exclusion as those confronted by black nationals. Afro-Latinx episteme, I argue, thus grows out of the experience of simultaneously belonging to multiple regimes of coloniality (i.e. Latin American and U.S.) and understandings of Blackness (mulato, black, Latinx) while also existing in a constant vaivén of belonging and unbelonging to multiple notions of nation-citizens in the diaspora.

The two series analyzed here present an image of Afro-Latinidad fraught with negative stereotypes, yet they also demonstrate the multiple colonialities of the Black Latinx community to the Spanish public and to the global audience of Netflix. In other words, the characters must navigate their way through a society that has labeled them as racial outsiders, and simultaneously as colonized subjects who must live in a nation-state that fails to recognize them as their equals.

3. *Toy Boy* seasons 1 and 2 were among the top 10 most viewed series (non-English) on Netflix in February 2022. *Sky Rojo* season 2 also made the list, debuting at the number 3 position in July 2021. <https://top10.netflix.com/tv-non-english?week=2021-07-04>

Toy Boy and the Fetishized Black Male Body

ISSN: 1523-1720
NUMERO/NUMBER 48
Enero/January 2023

On September 25, 2019, media conglomerate Atresmedia and production company Plano a Plano released the first season of *Toy Boy* on Antena 3 after a brief pre-release on the streaming platform Atresplayer. The thirteen-episode series received considerable viewership from the start with 1,849,000 spectators tuning in to the first episode and a 13.6% share. However, the series was met with harsh criticism from viewers and critics, resulting in a slide in spectatorship to 854,000 and a 6.3% share (Onieva). Despite this setback, the first season was released on Netflix in February of 2020 where it proved to be a success with international audiences, and consequently was renewed for a second season scheduled for March 2021. However, the release was delayed until early 2022 due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The plot centered around five male go-go dancers, played by relatively unknown actors at the time. These dancers work in a nightclub in Southern Spain entertaining female clients. The main character, Hugo (Jesús Mosquera), is accused of murder after waking up on a luxury boat with a burning corpse on deck. In what appears to be a well-executed framing, he spends seven years incarcerated for the crime until he is released provisionally due to a mistrial and lack of evidence. The rest of the plot shows his futile attempts to prove his innocence and uncover the real perpetrator of the crimes. He is aided by his close circle of coworkers from the club and his lawyer, Triana (María Pedraza). In addition, the series offers a number of subplots that involve wayward drug deals, corruption amongst the wealthy, and strained familial relations, giving us a more detailed look at the characters' personal lives. The twisting plotlines, action-packed scenes and the visually pleasing characters fill the twenty-one episodes, many of which exceed an hour in length. Despite the questionable "quality" of the series described by some critics as plagued with a "deliberately forced and essentially implausible" plot (Stiletano 2020), poor acting (Lamazares 2020), and a campy aesthetic reminiscent of a daytime soap opera (White 2020), the unresolved mystery on Hugo's boat, as well as the sexual allure of the Toy Boys, kept the viewers' interest piqued throughout the second season.

Out of the five members of the group it is Germán (Martiató), an Afro-Caribbean go-go dancer, who charms the clientele with his chiseled figure and exotic looks. He appears in the opening scene of the pilot episode when he crashes a party with the other "Toy Boys", as they call themselves, disguised as police officers at a racy birthday party. However, it isn't until later in the pilot episode that he is introduced to the viewer in more depth in a scene that establishes the lens through which he will be depicted throughout the series. The scene begins with a panoramic shot of a beachside pool as the camera slowly zooms out to reveal Germán laying in a lounge chair wearing only a white bikini, sharply contrasting with his dark skin tone, and guiding the viewer's gaze to his genital area. Immediately after, one of the other dancers and owner of the club, Iván (José de la Torre), approaches him to discuss business matters when an elderly lady touches him and smiles before walking away, insinuating that Germán has been working as an escort at the resort for a number of wealthy retired women. He lightheartedly replies, "Alguien tiene que hacerlo..." (*Toy Boy*. Season 1, Episode 1. 00:40:52-00:40:53). His work as an entertainer and sex worker is undeniably fueled by his exotic allure, which materializes in his flashy clothing, dark skin, and Cuban accent. This exoticism, as seen from a Spanish hegemonic perspective, is emphasized in the pool scene with its tropical décor, and in the hyper-sexualization of his racialized body, which he references in his conversation with Iván as "la máquina de felicidad" (*Toy Boy*. Season 1, Episode 1. 00:40:46 - 00:40:47). Iván also utilizes this phrase to reference Germán's body when he attempts to win Germán's favor and recruit him as a dancer in the reopening of

his club. He unflinchingly accepts the offer. In the second episode, Germán's body continues to serve as an object of desire for the other characters and the viewer. A salient example of this is when the female lawyer representing Hugo comes to the club. She searches for Hugo in a backstage room and enters to find Germán facing the attractive young lawyer, Triana, in a completely nude pose, and with the camera positioned behind Germán, forcing the spectator to gaze upon his exposed rear while her gaze is directed at his genitals. The objectifying gaze becomes a pattern throughout the series. However, unlike the other "toy boys", his sexual objectification is tied to his Blackness. This is apparent in the rhetoric used to describe Germán, which repeatedly considers his Blackness as an inextricable component of his beauty. After one of the raunchy routines in the *Inferno*, one of the clients leaving the club states, "No veas como estaba el chocolate, eh? Me vuelve loca" (*Toy Boy*. Season 1, Episode 9. 00:06:05 – 00:06:07).. In a later episode, an Irish mafia boss selects Germán from the "Toy Boys" as a special birthday present for his aunt, saying, "Look, I even got you a mandingo, Patt. Happy birthday" (*Toy Boy*. Season 1, Episode 12. 00:49:16 – 00:49:18)..The woman rises from her seat as she stares wide-eyed with lust and disbelief at his muscular body. The chocolate reference and mandingo comment reinforce the idea that Germán is marked simultaneously as a racialized character and an object of consumption.⁴ He is a source of pleasure stemming from his Blackness and the neocolonialist ideas attached to it.

The overt objectification and racializing of Germán is compounded by the lack of character development and involvement in the plot, as opposed to the other members of the dance group, each of whom are afforded more screen time, psychological and emotional depth, as well as a more active role in the plot. Very little background information is given about Germán, and he appears to be the one that is least involved in hatching a plan to save Hugo from returning to prison. Therefore, he is reduced to a mere object of sexual desire who is absent of intellectual or psychological depth. He is a foreigner aimlessly searching for pleasure and economic opportunities, an idea that is reinforced by his life motto: "Vive y deja vivir." (Live and let live). Thus, he never fully exists within the group of Toy Boys, as well as the Spanish nation-state, due to his Blackness and Cuban identity.

The Tragic Afro-Cuban female in *Sky Rojo*

Unlike *Toy Boy*, *Sky Rojo* is a Netflix original production that was produced by Vancouver Media, the same company that brought Spain's most successful series, as well as the second most watched series not in the English language, *La Casa de Papel* (2017) to viewers spanning the globe ("Netflix"). It's formula of impressive cinematography, action packed scenes with stunning special effects, and strong female leads packed into episodes lasting less than 30 minutes proved to be a commercial success.

The three lead characters are Coral, Wendy, and Gina (played by Spanish actress Verónica Sánchez, Argentine actress Lali Espósito, and Cuban actress Yany Prado, respectively) who are a trio of close-knit sex workers on the run from their hardhanded pimp, Romeo (Asier Etxeandia), and his assistants, Moisés and Christian (played by Miguel Ángel Silvestre and Enric Auquer, respectively). The action precipitates when Gina, the Afro-Cuban prostitute played by Prado, is called into Romeo's office to discuss her debts. She is blackmailed into paying him an exceedingly high price for business expenses at the brothel, including her trip to Spain, condoms, lubricant, lingerie, and other items necessary for sex work. She asks for more time to pay back her debts, and he refuses to return her passport, thus denying her the liberty to leave the club: "Invertí en ti. Te traje aquí" (*Sky Rojo*. Season 1, Episode 1. 00:10:58 – 00:11:01). She is stripped of all her power and agency as a

4. Mandingo is a stereotype of a sexually promiscuous and animalistic Black man, often portrayed with a large penis, that was propagated during the slave trade as a way of emphasizing the physical superiority of Black men at slave auctions. The term derives from the Mandinka people of West Africa who currently live in Senegal, Gambia, and parts of Guinea and Sierra Leone. Scott Poulson-Bryant's *Hung* (2005) discusses the mandingo stereotype, which is closely related to the film trope of "the black stud" or "the black buck" addressed in Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (2001).

mere “investment” for Romeo, reducing her to a sexual commodity. Trapped in Romeo’s web of power, the only possible escape is through violence. She strikes Romeo on the head with a trophy, and he retaliates by stabbing her multiple times with a ball-point pen. It appears that she has been defeated. However, she is rescued by her fellow sex workers, Coral and Wendy, who carry her bleeding body out of the club. Seeing that a trip to the hospital would alert the authorities and jeopardize their plan to save Gina, Coral decides that the best option is to take Gina to one of her trusted clients, a corrupt veterinarian. The fading Gina lies bleeding on the surgical bed where she is treated and revived. Her helpless body on a veterinary bed evokes images of an injured animal, only saved because of the efforts of her heroic friends and allies. Once again, she is presented in a degrading form which establishes her initially as a tragic and inferior character, though she challenges this representation in later scenes. To complicate matters, and further corroborate the image of a tragic, Afro-Latina woman in need of saving, Gina reveals that she is pregnant.

In the third episode of the first season, Gina finds the man who impregnated her, naively hoping that he will help the three friends escape and start a life with her. He is astonished to see her reappear at his residence, and even more so to see that she has left the club as a free woman. After telling him that she is pregnant with their child, he states, “me ocuparé de eso” (*Sky Rojo*. Season 1, Episode 3. 00:20:00 – 00:20:01) which shows that he exerts dominance and total control of her body. This idea is further cemented when he immediately turns her around without her consent and penetrates her in a degrading sex scene while Lou Reed’s “Perfect Day” plays in the background. She grimaces in discomfort, even closing her eyes momentarily. Unable to react, she silences her cries of terror and pain during the brutal rape scene. The action then abruptly shifts to a romantic flashback with Coral and Moisés on a luxury yacht. The jarring juxtaposition of the two scenes minimizes the possibility of empathizing with Gina by reshifting the focus on Coral’s memories.

Clearly, Coral is portrayed as the main heroine in the story, much like Hugo in *Toy Boy*, yet Gina is positioned as the character who is denigrated, ignored, silenced and abused. One of the ways that this is established is by limiting the development of her backstory, which is only briefly depicted in a flashback scene, and foregrounding Coral and Wendy’s story, whose Whiteness and Argentine identity places her in a privileged position in the series. In an emotional flashback scene accompanied by melodramatic music to set the tone, Wendy reveals that she left her humble neighborhood, Villa 31, with her female lover seeking an escape from her violent and homophobic environment. When her lover refused to work as a prostitute, Wendy accepted the offer as an act of sacrifice, leading her to the Club de Las Novias in Spain. In contrast, Gina’s backstory is not a romanticized tale of devotion, but rather depicts a naïve, young Cuban woman who is promised a better life in Spain as a waitress, only to be forced into sex work. Adding to her tragic story, it is revealed that her mother was responsible for selling her as a sex slave in Romeo’s brothel for financial compensation. It becomes apparent that she was one of several victims from impoverished areas in Latin American countries when Moisés confesses that the mothers of his victims embrace him for making an offer that assures their survival. In season 1 episode 5, he justifies this by saying “Y porque ahí, en todas las favelas, se mueren de hambre” (*Sky Rojo*. Season 1, Episode 5. 00:18:29 – 00:18:32). The racial implications of the word “favelas”, referring to underdeveloped neighborhoods in Brazil overwhelmingly populated by Black Brazilians (dos Santos Oliveira 73), cannot be ignored. The favela is a place of extreme poverty, yet it is also a site characterized by the exploitation of Black and mixed-race Brazilians, many of whom have been uprooted and displaced. Moisés uses this term, specific to the Brazilian context, indiscriminately when referencing sex workers from impoverished Latin

American neighborhoods. This generalization, which dislocates the specificity of the term, exemplifies a tendency by Spanish society to demarcate a difference by describing Latin Americans as poor, dark, and coming from dangerous regions. These characteristics are emphasized and hyperbolized by the metaphor of the favela. Additionally, Moisés' use of this term indicates that communities such as the favela, and Gina's poverty-stricken environment in Havana, benefit from the sex trade. She is one link in a chain of racial exploitation, which is made apparent by the multiple Latinas working in his brothel. Although the series brings to light a very real and urgent concern in Spain by highlighting the harmful effects of neocolonialism and capitalism in which Black and mixed-race women are forced into for survival, the representation of Gina as submissive, naive, and exploited creates a barrier that she must overcome as a victim of violence and as a racially marginalized woman in Spain. Although Gina is able to find the strength to rescue the other women in later episodes, her "otherness" and her inferiority is continually reinforced by the excessive use of Afro-Latina stereotypes and by limiting her narrative voice.⁵ Their narration at critical moments in the series expresses their deepest thoughts and emotional dilemmas, yet Gina's voice is suppressed, depriving her of complexity and depth.

Race, Gender and Colonialism in the Spanish mediascape

The question that now lingers is "What do the scenes described earlier say about Blackness and gender in Spain, and where do these images come from?" *Toy Boy* reveals a depiction of black masculinity that was not simply created and projected onto the screen, but rather one that has circulated in recent years in Spain. The dating reality series *Adán y Eva* (2014), infamous for its all nude contestants, featured a Black Spaniard in 2014 for the first time in an episode that drew considerable attention from fans and critics. The national newspapers *La Vanguardia* and *La Provincia* labeled him as, "un adonis ébano que tratará de enamorar a las dos 'Evas' en el programa de hoy", and "con un cuerpo de escándalo". The choice of words to describe the contestant was an undeniable example of the Spanish media commodifying the black male body as a sexual object of desire meant to satisfy the appetite of the two White Spanish female contestants on the episode, as well as the viewers. The case of *Adán y Eva* signaled a growing trend by the Spanish media to fetishize the black male body for white consumption. This phenomenon was not entirely unprecedented on Spanish television at the time, and certainly not a new phenomenon in Spanish cinema.⁶ The fetishization and commodification of Black bodies was well established in the American mediascape before lending itself to the Spanish media in the post-Franco era. Ronald Jackson identifies enslavement as the historical origin of exploiting and commodifying Black bodies, which was continually manifested in the popular media, including 18th century theater and early Hollywood film (e.g. *Birth of a Nation*). Jackson sees the mass media as a tool that uses Black bodies as "a canvas on which figurative scripts or writings are inscribed" (13). In this way, the Black body has been "scripted" as a site with symbolic meaning, such as the site of sexual deviance and pleasure. bell hooks also discusses the commodification of race as a source of pleasure. Racialized bodies create "an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other" (23). Therefore, the body of racialized Others is a necessary tool to reinforce relations of power through sexual commodification, which becomes solidified through repeated images in the mass media. The mandingo trope was one of the circulating images in early American media which was featured prominently in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and continued to appear for decades in Hollywood productions, as evidenced in the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. It was an early representation of black masculinity as animalistic and lascivious, posing an imminent threat of the rape of White women and

5. These are not unique to Afro-Latina women, but are rather an amalgamation of stereotypes attached to Black and Latina women a result of what Lorgia García Peña identifies as multiple "colonial entanglements", such as exotification, hyper-sexualization, and objectification. She explores these stereotypes in *Translating Blackness* (2022), as does Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez in *Decolonizing Diasporas* (2020).

6. Several scholars have written about the fetishization of Black characters in Spanish immigration films, including Michelle Murray in "The Politics of Looking in Fernando León de Aranoa's *Princesas*", and Ana Corbalán in "Questioning Cultural Hybridity: Perceptions of Latin American Immigration in Contemporary Spanish Cinema".

miscegenation. Black men became a source of racial terror in these films while simultaneously being treated as a sexual commodity, much like the exposed body of Germán in *Toy Boy* in the scene described earlier. The foregrounding of his work as a male escort and exotic dancer, compounded with the overt exhibiting of his body and genitals for the viewers to gaze upon, demonstrates these concepts playing out in Spanish television. This highly sexualized scene demonstrates how Black men are depicted as animalistic and devoid of mental and intellectual agency. They are reduced to the genitals, which can be threatening or enticing, as Frantz Fanon notes in *Black Skin, White Mask*. Additionally, the scene highlights the control that White Spaniards have over the Black body as a commodity that can be transferred from one sphere of control, the elderly clients at the resort, to the owner of the nightclub, who convincingly rehires Germán and his “maquinita”, which he states as he stares in the direction of his penis. The emphasis placed on Germán’s body creates a “biological” being, in Fanon’s terms, that must be conquered and contained.

In *Sky Rojo*, Gina is also seen as a sexual commodity due to her forced work in the sex industry, and by the way her body is brought into the viewer’s focus. The scene from the first episode demonstrates how this takes place, as her breast and torso are mutilated by Romeo. It is then in the hands of her friends to bring her to safety, and the veterinarian to heal her body, thereby restoring her for the sexual pleasure of men. The destruction and restoration of her body is a way to exert power and dominance over the Black female body by White men, which is a practice that can be traced back to slavery. Thus, her body circulates as a commodity in the sexual economy of slavery, or modern-day sexual slavery in Gina’s case (Davis 29). Her body is also brought into focus by the narrative of her pregnancy. It can hardly be overlooked that the one main character who becomes impregnated is a Black Latina woman, which is fraught with negative stereotypes in Spain and the United States. Additionally, the pregnancy narrative brings the focus back to her body as a site of pleasure, pain, and reproduction. Her body is essentially converted into a vessel that not only serves as a source of sexual desire through her sex work, but also a symbol of femininity. However, unlike Coral and Wendy who are depicted as strong and intellectual heroines liberated of masculine dominance, Gina’s pregnancy evokes a brand of feminism characterized as passive, nurturing, and submissive. These qualities, along with her expressed desire to become a mother in a nuclear family, as opposed to the other two women who reject a heteropatriarchal lifestyle, only serves to bolster her image as a fragile woman in need of saving, and an outsider who is incapable of embodying the modern, European womanhood displayed by Wendy and Coral. According to Saidiya Hartman, this idea of Black motherhood as a mode of subjugation and control can be traced back to the Atlantic slave trade. She states

The maternal function was not enshrined with minimal or restricted rights but indistinguishable from the condition of enslavement and its reproduction. Motherhood was critical to the reproduction of property and black subjection. (98)

Hartman’s quote can be understood in contemporary forms of slavery as well, represented by the Latina sex workers, and essentially sex slaves, in *Sky Rojo*. Gina’s pregnant body symbolizes the imperial desire to police Black and Latina reproduction, as we see in the sex scene analyzed previously, as well as a reminder of her subjection to the laws of a capitalist market and those who benefit from it. In addition to the inordinate focus on both characters’ bodies, the White Spaniard is positioned as a mentally superior race by limiting the presence and intellectual contributions of Germán and Gina. They are either largely silenced and absent when important decisions are made and unable to contribute to the main characters’ fight for freedom. Germán, for example, is essentially turned into a prop that only has a visible

presence and voice when the male bodies are on display. Patricia Hill Collins theorizes “At the same time that Blackness must be visible, it also must be contained and/or denuded of all meaning that threatens elites” (178). This explains why Germán is selectively placed in a highly visible position during the dance sequences, yet he is obscured from the more important plot elements. It is a formula of containment that is meant to exclude Black characters from intellectual and power circles by foregrounding the body. Gina experiences the same kind of intellectual and mental containment by restricting her dialogue and creativity, as noted earlier in her limited narration. She is silenced while the other two characters reflect and offer their personal analysis of the events that transpired. Even though she appears in the same shot as Coral and Wendy in many scenes, she is often filmed in a position that reinforces her as an inferior character, such as the back seat of the car, obscured, or out of focus. A prominent example of this occurs in the final episode of the first season when the three women are executing their plan to destroy their enemies and live in freedom. Coral, who is the main architect of the plan, returns to the club where she has a violent showdown with Romeo. Meanwhile, Wendy is fleeing from Moisés on a motorcycle while Gina nervously clings on behind her. After Moisés is baited into crashing his car in a large hole, Wendy gets in the driver’s seat of a tractor and buries him as Gina looks on from the ground. While there are moments when Gina shows bravery and strength, this critical scene is particularly significant because it reiterates Coral’s role as the intellectual component, Wendy as the brute force of the group, symbolized by her command of masculine machinery, and Gina’s passivity as an onlooker. These shots are subtle ways that the series creates a racial hierarchy with Whiteness being placed at the top of the ranks.

The hypersexualization and commodification of the Black body has gradually seeped into cultural productions worldwide. It is seen on television, film, theater, and advertisement. However, this cannot be seen as merely a result of the influence of American media and culture, in a transnational flow. The legacy of colonialism and slavery still persists in former empires and shapes the way Black communities in those nation-states are seen in the media. It is what Hill Collins calls “new racism”, which stems from racial formations established during earlier periods, yet it remains embedded in society in less explicit forms. (54). In the context of Spain, the representation of the black body must be further nuanced by tracing how colonialism has shaped the imaginations of Blackness attached to Afro-Latinos, and more specifically Afro-Caribbean identity.⁷ It would appear that the image of the Caribbean sex worker has been branded into the Spanish imagination. Germán and Gina are testimony to this enduring and pervasive trope. This idea can be fleshed out by identifying the patterns that are used to characterize Afro-Cubans as racially inferior outsiders, in particular through exotification and tropicalization. Cristina Carrasco explores the ways that Afro-Caribbeans are othered in the film *Princesas* by “exotización” or, exotifying the culture and people from the region. She points to the ways the body of the Caribbean sex worker is signaled as exotic by their fellow Spanish prostitutes, who claim that the Caribbean women “put something in their asses to make it bigger” and who are able to kiss better because of their teeth and lips. Carrasco is one of several scholars (Brennan 2004, Cabezas 2009, Mullings 1999, Padilla 2007) who have noted that much of this negative imagery stems from Cuba as a site of sex tourism for single Spanish men, or what Anne McClintock calls a “porno-tropic” where formerly colonized lands become a highly sexualized space for the former colonizers. (McClintock as referenced in Carrasco 239). Drawing from the idea of Said’s *Orientalism*, it is the representations by Anglo and European nations of “countries and cultures ‘south of the border’ in textualizations that have, in the main, reified the political, economic, and cultural hegemony of the ‘neighbor to the north’ (Aparicio and

7. Research on Afro-Latino identity in the Caribbean is analyzed in several scholarly texts, including but not limited to *The Dominican Racial Imaginary* (2016) by Milagros Ricourt, *Afro-Latin@s in Movement* (2016) by Petra Rivera-Rideau, et al., and *Afro-Cuban voices: On race and identity in contemporary Cuba* (2000) edited by Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs.

Chávez-Silverman 1). One of the patterns that is used to tropicalize the characters of the Caribbean is through their clothing and accessories. This is especially true for Gina, who is seen wearing brightly colored dresses with feather patterns, as opposed to the more tepid outfits donned by Coral and Wendy. One of the promotional billboards for the series in Madrid's Plaza de Colón demonstrated how fashion is used as a way of othering the female Caribbean body. Gina is wearing large hoop earrings, a feathered pink miniskirt and a shiny, teal halter-top exposing her torso and cleavage. In addition, she is holding a cocktail in her left hand while the other hand is holding the straw to her lips as she seductively stares off in the distance. In contrast, the two other female protagonists' bodies are not as exposed and they are each holding guns in an aggressive, rather than seductive, pose. The flashy costumes and overtly sexualized props that Gina is displaying in the ad demonstrate what Jorge Pérez calls a "sartorial hypervisibility" that racializes and exotifies black characters in Spanish film, and in this case Spanish television (27). In *Toy Boy*, Germán represents an idealized form of the Caribbean man wearing his white speedo as he lounges at the pool with fruit and a cocktail, which contrasts with the image of the fully clothed Iván who is there to discuss business matters. These forms of tropicalizing the Afro-Cuban characters sustain colonial ideologies by continually circulating degrading images and stereotypical representations on the screen, and consequently, branding these ideas into the Spanish consciousness.

Conclusion: Challenging Black representations in the Spanish media

As institutional racism is increasingly being addressed in a number of arenas, change is on the horizon for communities that optimistically look to the future as a time of inclusion and reckoning with the past. Nevertheless, this becomes a greater challenge in spaces and nation-states that are considered post-racial. The term "post racial" gained considerable currency in the United States during the Obama presidency in 2008, asserting that society and state has moved beyond and healed from the racial division of previous years. The cultural anthropologist Dan Rodríguez García argues that Spain sees itself as a "post-racial" nation-state that has purged its society of the specter of colonialism. By making this claim of being a post-racial haven, Spanish society is essentially masking the underlying effects of racism that continue to disenfranchise immigrants and racialized communities (2). Post-racial society and globalization have also made multiculturalism and diversity more visible on the screen. Non-White actors are growing in demand in Spain as Netflix and other OTT platforms produce more content for a global audience. Afro-Latino actors, such as Yany Prado and Raudel Martiato, are testaments to this changing dynamic, as well as Black Spaniards, including the popular actors Berta Vázquez and Will Shephard, both of whom had leading roles in the Netflix series *Vis a Vis* and *Mar de Plástico*, respectively. The problem with this new form of inclusive casting is that racialized communities are still positioned as "others", which only serves to reaffirm White Spanish hegemony. Rosalía Cornejo Parriego calls for a reckoning in contemporary Spain that involves self-representation in order to arrive at the moment when Spanish and Black are no longer mutually exclusive categories (35). In sum, media institutions must prioritize uprooting representations of the "other" that are anchored to the colonial past, as well as rethinking fixed notions of Blackness by creating a space for Black production behind the camera. A group called The Black View is a collection of Black and Brown actors and artists based in Madrid who have made it their primary objective to normalize Blackness on the screen and create a more positive representation of racialized communities (<https://theblackview.com/>). One of the ways this is achieved is by giving Black artists the creative space to write about their own experiences, the opportunity to produce film and television, and to create and interpret roles that accurately reflect their personal experiences. While this would appear to be far on the horizon, there

are directors, such as Santiago Zannou, who are paving the way for Black and first-generation Spaniards to challenge the dominance of White Spaniards in film production. In addition to the mainstream studios, Black productions are turning to alternative mediums which allow more creative freedom, notably YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. The popular influencer on TikTok and Instagram, Afropoderosa, is an example of Black Hispanic artists creating a space on social media where they can address issues in Spain, and create messages of optimism, solidarity, or even defiance, using nonconventional methods to reach a large audience. These initiatives are an important step in the right direction. However, White Spanish media players will also need to reflect on how they are perpetuating racism in ways that are becoming more difficult to recognize on the surface. Questions such as the one I posed at the beginning of this essay should direct the industry to look inward, as well as outward, when it comes to racial concerns. In other words, the media must do more than post positive messages of support for the Black community, but also critique their own industries and networks which continually silence and exploit Blacks, Latinos, and other racially marginalized groups. This means not only reexamining the roles Black actors bring to life on the screen, but also the lack of representation behind the screen.

This analysis of Afro-Latino characters on the two series serves as a starting point for uncovering the problematic representation of racialized Others on one of the most popular mediums, and explores the way racial hierarchies are affirmed. While some viewers and critics have seen the increasing presence of Black and Brown actors as a step in the right direction, I would caution that visibility alone does not lead to the dismantling of racist ideologies. For that reason, television shows must be analyzed with a more critical lens in order to expose the way Blackness is imagined in Spain and how it is reproduced discursively. The two characters I have analyzed show how difference is clearly emphasized in order to assert racial superiority of White Spaniards. Notably, Gina and German's stories are cast aside and the other characters' perspectives are centered. They are developed in more depth and given intellectual and psychologic nuances, even branded as heroes, while the two Afro-Latino characters are presented primarily as primitive, hypersexualized and corporeal. These observations have been researched extensively in the case of cinema, yet they are overlooked in television, an area that has long been an object of disdain for academics (Palacio 12). By giving more attention to the way television sustains racial hierarchies, we can begin to understand how racist tropes persist and evolve in somewhat inconspicuous forms, as well as the ways that neocolonial ideologies are sustained. Perhaps, in a not-so-distant future, the industry will begin to hire screenwriters, producers and directors from Black and Brown communities, thus allowing them to tell their own stories and critique the structural and social inequalities in Spanish society.

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