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MUSIC AND NARRATIVE: PORTRAYING RACE, CLASS AND GENDER ON THE CANVAS OF PRE-REVOLUTIONARY CUBA IN *LAS CRIADAS DE LA HABANA* BY PEDRO PEREZ SARDUY

David Akbar Gilliam
DePaul University

The year 1959 has become a defining moment in modern Cuban history. When the Cuban Revolution declared victory on January 1, 1959 and Fidel Castro entered Havana to replace Fulgencio Batista as the head of the Cuban government, it provoked polemics, dialogue and disagreement that continue with a vehemence unabated even after fifty years. Pedro Pérez Sarduy's novel *Las criadas de la Habana* (*The Maids of Havana*, 2010), first published in 2001, encompasses this cataclysmic turning point in the story of modern Cuba, beginning in the late 1940s, shortly after World War II, and ending in the mid-1990s. The narrator is a woman of African descent whose primary vocation is working as a domestic in the homes of well-to-do Cubans. Two other main characters, also women and also of African descent, take the reader intimately into the next generation - the experiences of Cubans coming of age on the island after the ascent of Castro and the experiences of Cubans coming of age in the United States during and after the prolific growth of the exile community in the decades following the Revolution.

Because the story is narrated from an Afro-Cuban perspective, the reader gets to hear and observe not only the expected dialogue between pro-Castro and anti-Castro voices, but the sometimes strident, sometimes subtle voices of Afro Cuba, Peninsular Spanish Cuba, Anglo America and Afro America (United States). This rich and complex texture of voices causes the reader to reflect on cultural, racial and class identity on the island; the new cultural identities and relationships, both personal and social, that arise from the Cuban experience in the United States; and the relationship between the Afro-Cuban and U.S. African American cultures and experiences.

The text of Chapter One, "El baile de las flores" ("The Floral Dance"), initiates dialogues and introduces themes that the reader will see and hear throughout the novel. Transition figures as an important theme of the first chapter. This theme is foreshadowed through two concurrent metaphors in the chapter's final passage (Pérez 17-18 Ed. 2004)¹, but only visible clearly as a theme when viewed in the context of events that are revealed in the second and third chapters. The transition represents the completion of a cycle of time - ending one phase and beginning a new phase. An apparently stable and happily married housewife and mother suddenly becomes a young divorcée who must support herself and her three children. We see an abrupt and dramatic change in

the narrator's life which in turn serves as a metaphor for the abrupt change which will come to Cuba years later in the form of the Revolution, when an apparently stable island nation quickly changes its political, economic and social relationships, both domestic and international.

Another theme is the creation of a world of fantasy, or make-believe, by many Afro-Cubans which defies and denies the economic realities of their existence. This Afro-Cuban fantasy world initiates a dialogue with a "world of make-believe," created by some Blacks in the United States, for a corresponding and parallel purpose: to buffer its creators from the "harsh economic and social realities of American life" (Frazier 229). Through the inserted genre of musical lyrics and the heteroglossia of foreign words which occur in the characters' dialogue (used and understood by them in everyday conversation in Cuban Spanish) and descriptions of the membership and activities of Santa Clara's social clubs, among other artistic devices, the text of "El baile de las flores" develops dialogues on racial, cultural and class relationships on the island and between the island and the U.S. mainland.

The chapter "El baile de las flores" ("The Floral Dance") opens the novel. Every year, Marta narrates, "El baile de las flores" was the occasion most anxiously awaited by the young people and especially young married couples. Those planning to attend, men and women, but especially women, began planning their elaborate outfits for that gala event months ahead of time. Marta describes the experience of this occasion - an unforgettable evening from her past, when two young couples, she and her husband, Orlando, and Orlando's younger brother, Rey, and Rey's wife, Antonia, shared the sights, the sounds, the tastes and the camaraderie of a culminating life moment, a moment that captured an era of her life, and an era of Cuba.

In the chapter "El baile de las flores" (literally, "The Dance of the Flowers") the image of the flower predominates. The name of this dance event appears in the title and then three times in the text (12, 13, 14) when the narrator refers to the event. The word gardenia occurs three times in the lyrics of the song "Dos gardenias" ("Two Gardenias") which is quoted in the text in its entirety, following the opening passage, when Marta and Antonia spontaneously break into song to relive their evening even before it's over. The gardenia flower is the principal metaphor of this now "classic bolero," written in the 1930s by Isolina Carrillo (Gold and Williamson 5), which Marta explains, was making a

comeback, and all the rage (“*hacía furor nuevamente*” (11)), at the time of the dance (in the late 1940s).

The flower is at once a herald of spring (a sign of change and transition), a reminder of the transitory nature of life, and a symbol of feminine beauty. La Bella Unión, the social club which planned and hosted this long-standing event, intended for it to strictly represent the spiritual and aesthetic aspects of flowers and springtime where once it had also been invested with patriotic and political significance.

...al gran “Baile de las Flores”, que era el de la bienvenida de la primavera y la inauguración de la temporada veraniega. Antes coincidía con la celebración de la Independencia, el 20 de mayo, pero la Bella Unión quería que fuera dedicado a las flores y así se quedó. (14-15)

(...to the great Floral Dance, the one where we welcomed in the spring and celebrated the beginning of the summer season. Before, it used to coincide with the celebration of Independence Day, May 20th, but the Bella Unión wanted it to be dedicated to the flowers, and so it was and so it continued.)²

The phrasing, “que fuera dedicado a las flores,” (a more literal translation would be “that it be dedicated to the flowers”) suggests a spiritual, or even a religious tone, hearkening back to Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers. This tone will certainly support our conclusion that el “Baile de las Flores” holds a special and revered place in Marta’s memory.

Some of the best known and often recited poems in Spanish language have featured the flower as a metaphor for the transitory nature of life. Three sonnets, two from the Spanish Golden Age and one from the Baroque period, may serve as examples. In his “Soneto XXIII,” (“Sonnet XXIII”), Garcilaso de la Vega (1501-1536) begins:

En tanto que de rosa y de azucena
se muestra la color en vuestro gesto,
(While the rose and white lily
still show their colors in your face,)

In the two final triplets, he concludes connecting images of springtime and youth and the fleeting life of the flower:

coged de vuestra alegre primavera
el dulce fruto, antes que el tiempo airado
cubra de nieve la hermosa cumbre
(pluck from your joyous springtime
the sweet fruit, before wrathful time
covers over with snow your crowning glory)
Marchitará la rosa el viento helado,
todo lo mudará la edad ligera
por no hacer mudanza en su costumbre.
(The freezing wind will wither the rose,
Swift time will change everything
because its custom alone remains unchanged.)

In like fashion, Luis de Góngora (1561-1627) concludes “Soneto CLXVI” comparing the unparalleled but short-lived beauty of life, especially youth, with that of flowers, then highlights the end awaiting both:

goza cuello, cabello, labio y frente,
antes que lo que fue en tu edad dorada
oro, lilio, clavel, cristal luciente,
(take pleasure in your neck, hair, lips and face,
before what was in your golden age
gold, iris, carnation, shining crystal)
no sólo en plata o viola troncada
se vuelva, mas tú y ello juntamente
en tierra, en humo, en polvo, en sombra, en
nada.
(Turns not only silver or into violets cut down,
but you and all of that together into earth, into
smoke, into dust, into shadow,
into nothingness.)

Finally, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695), born in Mexico, and one of the Baroque period’s greatest poets, begins her sonnet “A una rosa” (“To A Rose”) with the words “Rosa divina...” (“Divine rose...”) She completes the poem with:

¡Cuán altiva en tu pompa presumida,
soberbia, el riesgo de morir desdeñas,
y luego desmayada y encogida
de tu caduco ser das mustias señas,
con que con docta muerte y necia vida,
viviendo engañas y muriendo enseñas!
(How puffed up in your pompous conceit,
arrogant, you scoff at the idea of dying,
and then collapsed and shrunken
from your perished, withered self you show,
through sage death and foolish life,
while living you deceive, in dying you instruct!)

In her *bolero*, “Dos gardenias,” Afro-Cuban composer, singer and songwriter Isolina Carrillo (1907-1996) continues the Spanish literary tradition of using the flower as a metaphor for the brevity of life and its essence. Perhaps Carrillo’s most famous composition, “Dos gardenias” has become a standard that audiences expect every bolero singer to know (Gold and Williamson 5). While employing the flower metaphor, Carrillo deviates and re-interprets the tradition. In the early lines of the song, we discover that the two gardenias represent the hearts of the two lovers:

Ponle toda tu atención,
que serán tu corazón y el mío.
Dos gardenias para ti, (Pérez 11)
(Look after them because
they are your heart and mine
Two gardenias for you
(Adlington and Clarke 19))

But we also soon discover that these two gardenias, unlike the flowers portrayed in the sonnets, are not expected to die of natural causes. They die only if the one who receives the gift of gardenias betrays the giver. The bolero concludes:

Pero si un atardecer,
las gardenias de mi amor se mueren,
es porque han adivinado
que tu amor me ha traicionado
porque existe otro querer... (Pérez 12)

(But if one late evening,
the Gardenias should die
it's because they know
that you have betrayed me
and that you love another
(Adlington and Clarke 19)).

As we have seen in the sonnets, women have been associated in the Spanish (and other) literary traditions with the beauty of flowers. Some observers have noted the “receptive cup-like form of the flower is symbolically passive and feminine” (Tresidder 190). In this instance Marta, like Isolina Carrillo, will deviate and re-interpret tradition. Marta and the other female characters that are presented later in the novel express femininity without being passive. They play active, assertive roles, but take pride in their feminine attributes. In the first chapter, both Marta and Antonia invest a great deal of time and effort in crafting and sewing their gowns for the dance. This activity highlights their feminine creativity and is aimed at artistically embellishing the female form and enhancing their attractiveness to the opposite sex. Both women take the lead in performance of the song “Dos gardenias,” while the men take the lead in the dancing. In the conversation and banter, men and women take equal parts. Even Marta’s mother, Alberta, plays a strong role as chaperone for Marta and Marta’s sister, interacting with their prospective suitors, such as Orlando, to whom she eventually gave her consent to marry Marta. Alberta served as both a designer and maker of their evening gowns and the architect and agent of their marriage plans.

The portrayal of the Black woman in this chapter goes against the grain in another respect. The stereotypical image of the Black woman created by European colonial culture in the Americas and in Africa itself is a woman of wanton lasciviousness, given to unbridled sexual expression and showing little concern or consciousness of spiritual and moral values. The portrait of Marta is quite the opposite, in spite of her keen awareness and sensitive expression of female beauty and her interest in the opposite sex. Marta recounts her reaction when she first laid eyes on Orlando, her future husband. “No puedo negar que desde la primera vez que lo vi me moría por bailar con él” (16). (“I cannot deny that from the first time I saw him I was dying to dance with him.”) Her courtship completed a period of four years, before and during which time she was scrupulously chaperoned by her mother. Marta first reveals that she has been married for seven years (“...en cuanto a mí que llevaba más de siete años de casada...” (12)/ “since I had been married for more than seven years...”), then later in the chapter we learn that their first born child has just had his sixth birthday (“...de nuestro primer hijo.... Ramoncito, que acababa de cumplir seis años se quedaba en casa de su abuela y sus tías...” (15)/ “of our first child.... Ramoncito, who had just had his sixth birthday and was staying at the home of his grandmother and aunts...”). The reader is left with no doubt that Marta grew up in a strong moral environment, regardless of her humble origins. The implication is that sexual relationships would be sanctioned when they could be of equal benefit to man and woman, in a family context which to a great degree would assure the woman’s future, in contrast to relationships outside the frame of marriage. When events at the “Baile de las Flores” cause Marta to recall scenes from her courtship and pre-courtship years, we get a glimpse of the perspective (of her mother, Alberta) that shaped Marta’s experience:

Sí que le gustaba llevarnos a todas las fiestas que queríamos,

pues en definitiva, ése era el mejor sitio para una conocer a un buen hombre y yo sé que nuestra madre tenía metido eso en la cabeza. Pues ni qué decir, que así fue como se inició aquella relación que después de cuatro años resultó en matrimonio... (17)

(She definitely liked to take us to all the parties we wanted to go to, since for sure, that was the best place for you to meet a good man and I know that our mother had that idea firmly in her head. And it goes without saying that that’s how the relationship began that four years later finally ended up in my marriage...)

In a sense, Chapter One represents a dance of flowers, or female characters. But none is passive; each is a strong Afro-Cuban woman. From composer Isolina Carrillo, to Antonia, Marta’s sister-in-law, to Alberta, Martha’s mother, to Marta herself, each contributes an imposing performance to the dance. This dance may break a stereotypical image held by the reader before witnessing this dance, or it may establish an image of the Afro-Cuban woman in the mind of the reader where before there existed only a void. On the floor of the dancehall of the Bella Unión, the men lead. But in the narration of the first chapter, and throughout the novel, the women lead; it is they who are the protagonist, narrators and central figures. The reader sees through their eyes.

Let us now consider how the text deals with the factor of race. The book initiates and provokes a dialogue on race from the moment a reader lays eyes on its cover. The two most recent editions of Pedro Pérez Sarduy’s novel *Las criadas de La Habana* (2003 and 2004), and the newly released translation, *The Maids of Havana* (2010), all feature a cover photograph of two young couples dressed elegantly, in a dance pose, who have dark complexions and African features. On the cover, adjacent to the photograph, the title is written. In fact, the juxtaposition of the title and photo forms a textual-graphical implicature (Levinson 97-98). The picture sends a strong suggestion that the theme of the novel will be based around people (i.e. characters) of African descent and/or issues that relate to them. However, this implicature could be cancelled (proved to provoke a false assumption) should the theme and plot of the novel have only a tenuous or coincidental relationship to Africa, Afro-Cubans or their history, culture or concerns (Levinson 114).

Seeing the cover, a potential reader may think “Las criadas son negras” (“The maids are Black); or “¿Son estas mujeres criadas?” (“Are these women maids?”); or “Esta gente será de La Habana” (“These people must be from Havana”); or even “¿Hay habaneros negros que sean de la alta sociedad?” (“Are there Black Havanans who belong to high society?”). A whole series of suggestions, questions and apparent contradictions may capture the reader’s attention and invite a reading of the novel. Many potential readers may know that Africans and people of African descent play a role in Cuba’s history and culture, but many, if not most, will be prepared for the implicature to be cancelled if they decide to read the novel. Novels by Black Hispanic writers, and which feature Black protagonists or Afro-Hispanic themes, are still relatively unknown to the reading public (Jackson xi-xiii). Such novels are even less known to the English-reading public, because many titles are simply not available in English translation. *The Maids of Havana* itself is a case in point: only after the publication of three editions in Spanish and nine years after its initial appearance in print has a translation reached an English speaking readership.

In the first few pages of text, there is no overt mention of race. Instead, the narrator draws the reader into the excitement of the end of an unforgettable evening where the participants are still brimming over with song and a sense of the unsurpassed elegance and style of the occasion. However, those readers who are familiar with Cuban culture will recognize the names of Isolina Carrillo and Beny Moré as well-known Afro-Cuban contributors to the Cuban musical tradition when Marta mentions them in her narration.

race and class that are in effect. The reader may realize that his or her initial experience of these characters and their world was like that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden before eating from the tree of knowledge.

Then our text lays bare the hierarchy of race and class that will serve as our point of reference throughout the novel:

...el gran "Baile de las Flores en la Sociedad Bella Unión, que era para personas de color. Ese día había fiesta en todo Santa



The Maids of Havana book cover.

The initial passages of Marta's narration let the reader focus on the characters' personalities and humanness, without regard to race, culture or class. Even in this relatively brief introduction to Marta's world, and some of the characters who live in it, the reader will find it difficult to forget their warmth and the reader's own ease in identifying with their circumstances and the emotion of their evening. The reader will be forced to come to terms with her or his reaction to these characters and the world they inhabit when Marta broadens its perspective to include the realities of

Clara. En la Sociedad El Gran Maceo, de los mulatos y algunos negros con dinero; en el Casino Español, de los blancos de buena posición; en el Santa Clara Tennis Club y en el Liceo, frente al Parque Vidal, que era donde los blancos ricos se reunían a celebrar lo suyo. (13)

(...the great Floral Dance at Bella Unión Society, which was for people of color. That day there were festivities in all Santa Clara. In the Gran Maceo Society, whose members were

mulattoes and a few Blacks with money; in the Casino Español, whose members were white and middle-class; in the Santa Clara Tennis Club and in the Liceo, across from Vidal Square, which was where wealthy whites gathered to celebrate in their own style.)

In the midst of our late evening reverie, Marta reveals, but in a casual, informative manner, not in a declarative or denunciatory manner, that race matters in determining who socializes and celebrates together. And not only race, but class matters, or more specifically, the level of wealth or income of an individual. The description allows for a certain flexibility or elasticity in the boundaries between groups. The reader must also remain alert for an elasticity in the terms used to refer to one group or another. When are the terms or groups distinct; when is there overlap? Marta's club, la Sociedad Bella Unión "era para personas de color" ("was for people of color"/"was for Black folks"), while la Sociedad Gran Maceo consisted of "mulatos y algunos negros con dinero" (people of mixed African and European (Spanish) blood and some Blacks with money).

The progression of the descriptions of club memberships seems to be proceeding from more African to more European, and from less to more money. We might reasonably infer from context that "personas de color" and "negros" are here used interchangeably, and that personas de color, that is negros, with more money would be able to choose to join Sociedad Gran Maceo, whose primary membership consists of people of mixed race. Most likely this club takes its name from "el mulato Antonio Maceo" who along with "[d]el blanco José Martí" (the white/Spanish descended José Martí) is known as one of Cuba's two greatest patriots and fighters for independence from Spain (Castellanos 30). "Los blancos de buena posición" ("well-to-do whites") make up the membership of el Casino Español. In the name of their club we observe their identification with their Spanish roots. Rich/wealthy whites ("los blancos ricos") were disposed to establish their own group at the Santa Clara Tennis Club and in the Liceo, apart from either blacks or mulatos or whites with less money. We may surmise that a name in English reflected an image of exclusivity. But even as we observe the separateness, as well as some porosity between groups, we are reminded of a Cubaness with which they all identify: "Ese día había fiesta en todo Santa Clara." ("That day there were festivities all over Santa Clara.") Thus in one brief description, Marta has provided a clear and simplified point of reference for Cuba's racial and class identities and, by extension, Cuba's social, cultural and political development through historical time.

This dialogue of national identity, Cubaness (cubanidad), class and race which Marta's description initiates is pursued through the inserted genre of song lyrics and music. In el "Baile de las Flores," the Orquesta Aragón de Cienfuegos announces its arrival on the stage and the commencement of the evening's dance music by playing its theme song (15). Then the first piece they play is a danzón, "La flauta mágica." Marta points out the refinement and sophistication of the music and the dance steps of the danzón compared to the more energetic and unrestrained movements of the mambo. In fact, many authorities view the danzón as the undisputed national dance of Cuba from the 1880s to the 1920s, although it still remained popular long afterward, with new danzones being written as late as the 1990s (Castellanos 342 and Díaz Ayala 8). The mambo, which did not emerge as a dance form until the late 1930s (Castellanos 354), would have been seen as

more "cutting edge" by the members of the sociedad Bella Unión when Marta attended the "Baile de las Flores."

But this dialogue between dance styles is one in which the voices freely mix and mingle. Both the names and styles of these dances connote a more Spanish or European style (danzón) in contrast to a more African style (mambo). And the movements of the danzón do routinely include operatic and classical (European) melodies among its set of four to six sections or movements, with most played at a slower tempo (Castellanos 344 and Cabrera Infante 4). This danzón's title, "La flauta mágica" ("The Magic Flute"), evokes the famous opera with the same title, *The Magic Flute* (*Die Zauberflöte*), composed by Wolfgang Mozart in 1791. This title accentuates the European side, or voice, of danzón. But through the words of Manuel Serafín Pichardo, Cuba's poetic tradition bears witness that even the danzón possesses both Spanish and African roots:

Es, poeta, el danzón, ritmo cubano
con aires de andaluz y de africano. (Castellanos 343)
(The danzon, o poet, is rhythm that is Cuban
with a taste of Andalucian and African.)

The lyrics of the next number that Orquesta Aragón plays reveal and satirize this dual and potentially conflicted cultural identity, adding still another voice to the dialogue. From the days of the Spanish colonial Régimen de Castas (Caste Regime), Africa was on the bottom of the European/Amerindian/African hierarchy with all its racial combinations and iterations; Spain always occupied the topmost position (Andrews 44; Burns and Charlip 29). As she narrates her story, Marta includes the lyrics of this song, and shares the excited reaction of the dancers and listeners around her:

No negrita, no... [sic]
no bailes más la conga así...
No, negrita, no, mira que soy de sociedad...
Porque si me ven,
Bailando como en el Manglar,
toda mi argumentación de negro fino
se me va a caer...
No... (16)
(No, negrita, no...
don't dance the Conga like that any more
No, negrita, no, can't you see I'm high
society...
And if they see me,
Dancing like they do in the Manglar,
my whole claim to being a Black man with
class
will come crashing down on me...
No...)

The poetic voice of the song addresses his dance partner, using the term 'negrita'. This term, whether used in direct address, or used indirectly as an exclamation ("Ay, mi negra") is often used in Spanish as a term of endearment or affection, without regard to the racial background or physical features, including skin color, of the person addressed. Furthermore, the diminutive suffix '-ita' is used in Spanish to denote small size in a literal sense, but in a broader and more figurative sense is used commonly and colloquially to indicate affection or an intensification of a quality (Butt and Benjamin 401-405). 'Negrita,' as a shortened form of

'letra negrita,' literally intensely black, is rendered into English as bold face or bold type, which stands out from the rest of the text because of its darker color (Collins and DRAE). In the context of "la Sociedad Bella Unión, que era para personas de color," we may argue that 'negrita' communicates an ironic combination of endearment and intensely black.

Using three negatives to drive his point home to his dance partner ("No, negrita, no... no bailes" / No, negrita, no... don't dance"), the poetic voice implores her not to dance the conga like that any more. 'Conga' is at once a dance, a drum, a line of dancers and an ethnic group among the many from Africa brought to Cuba (Castellanos 285-290). All meanings carry the clear linguistic association with Congo, figuratively and literally the heart or center of Africa. After pleading with two more no's, he says, "Look (Can't you see that)" "soy de sociedad" presenting the reader with another double-voiced utterance (Bakhtin 313-314 and Emerson 128). The poetic voice may be indicating, "I'm a member of a society (Sociedad Bella Unión or any other "para gente de color" / "for people of color; Black people"). At the same time, he may be indicating "I'm a member of society," meaning la alta sociedad" or high society – recognized by the larger Cuban society, including whites, as "[un] negro fino" (a high class Black). The poetic voice may be referring to either or both "societies". Neither claim invalidates the other, hence the double voice. Either situation may involve an element of hypocrisy, pretense, impersonation, deceit and denial of his true identity. If he is seen dancing like [they do or I do] in Manglar "bailando como en el Manglar," (literally a mangrove swamp, but capitalized serves as a place name, such as the name of a Black section of town), his case ("mi argumentación"), that he has so painstakingly constructed will come tumbling down around him ("se me va a caer").

'Argumentación' has legal and rhetorical connotations. We are reminded of Bartolomé de Las Casas' series of debates with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda during the first century after the Conquest. The two argued about whether or not the peoples living in the Americas when the Spanish arrived had souls (Fuentes 125, 134; Williams 36). In a like manner, and until the present, people of African descent in Cuba and elsewhere have often struggled to argue their spiritual and legal equality to the rest of society. But this striving and straining has sometimes brought both tragic and comic results: having to deny the African aspects of one's identity. The poetic voice of the song presents the comic elements, but as a double voice, maintains the tragic aspects just under the surface. Marta's and the other dancers' reaction to this song is electric ("era la locura" (16)/ "the place went crazy"). They immediately identify with the poetic voice ("todo el mundo lo cantaba" (16)/ "everybody was singing it") and demonstrate a full appreciation for the humor and the irony of his situation. And for the reader, the elements of a Bakhtinian dialogue on cultural identity are unmistakable: a classic Cuban danzón juxtaposed to the ironic image of "un negro fino" ("a Black man with class").

More ironies await the reader. When first we observe the opulence and luxury of the "Baile de las Flores" – the gowns and suits worn by the participants, the orchestra hired by the Sociedad Bella Unión, the horse-drawn cab employed by Marta's party of four to facilitate their arrival, the top-shelf alcoholic beverages consumed (such as Pedro Domecq cognac), the after-party breakfast at the Café Parisién – surely we are impressed with the level of quality and the planning that go into creating this evening. And Marta goes into detail to describe the fabrics and the innovation

involved in creating the ladies' dresses and the men's suits. When we pause and weigh all factors, we as the reader may ask, am I observing lifestyles of the rich and famous or elaborate self-deceptions of the oppressed? We note a significant contradiction between the financial sums needed to pay for the expenses of the occasion and the earning power of Marta, her husband, his brother and the brother's wife.

Our text paints a clear picture of this contradiction, or lack of proportion, between income and expenses:

...sobre todo cuando una sabía que lo que llevaba puesto valía el esfuerzo de todo un año de trabajo, por que a veces los vestidos llegaban a costar hasta cien pesos y las fiestas eran tres y cuatro al año y, como dije antes, por nada de la vida una iba dos veces a un baile con el mismo traje. Mucho menos al gran "Baile de las Flores,"... (14)

(...especially when you knew that what you were wearing equaled the effort of a whole year's work, because sometimes the dresses cost as much as 100 pesos and the parties came three and four per year and, like I said before, there was no way you would wear the same gown twice to a dance. Especially not to the great "Floral Dance"...)

Even if we allowed for some exaggeration, although as her subsequent narrative shows, Marta is not one given to exaggeration, Marta's account indicates that she and her companions are truly driven to come up with the resources necessary to afford the outfits alone for these dances. The price of elegance is sacrifice, great sacrifice. Marta has mentioned that she has a six-year-old son, Ramoncito. She also mentions that she was to give birth to a daughter, Teresita, whom she conceives, according to her doctor's reckoning, on the very night of the "Baile de las Flores." Marta's husband, Orlando, is a shoemaker ("zapatero" (13)) and his brother, Rey, Antonia's husband, works as a chauffeur for a well-known architect (14). These are not the vocations of professional or moneyed men. There is no mention of employment outside the home for Marta and Antonia, only their working to design and sew their fabulous gowns.

Husbands and wives were unified in their desire to attend these dances in style, and the men were determined to furnish first their wives, and then themselves, with whatever was necessary to make a strong fashion statement. Referring to her husband and Antonia's, Marta notes:

A los dos hermanos, mi marido y el suyo, les encantaba que nos vistieramos con las mejores ropas y trabajábamos todo el año por complacerlos y porque ellos, a la verdad, se vestían que había que verlos....

A los dos les gustaba fiestar y gastársela toda en ocasiones como ésa, el gran "Baile de las Flores..." (13)

(The two brothers, my husband and hers loved for us to wear the best clothes and we worked all year in order to indulge them and because they, let it be said, dressed up in a way that was not to be missed....

Both men liked to party and go for broke on occasions like this one, the great "Floral Dance"...)

The phrase “gastársela toda” (spend it all / go for broke) sums up both their financial circumstance and their attitude. We must presume that at least part of the psychic payoff for their investment they received from the admiration of the crowds gathered to witness the grand entrance of those arriving to attend the dance: “Siempre había una enorme multitud afuera que se paraba especialmente a ver las ropas de los bailadores, sobre todo los vestidos de las mujeres” (14). (“There was always an enormous crowd outside that stood waiting just to see the outfits of the dancers, especially the women’s dresses.”) We see conspicuous consumption at its best.

When the reader passes beyond the first chapter, “El baile de las flores,” and sees the tremendous financial struggle that Marta experiences as a direct result of her divorce, and the failure or inability of her children’s father to support them or her, the reader can only reflect on the vast sums spent on the wonderful evenings sponsored by the social clubs. Would or could her life have been different if a portion of those sums had been plowed into savings? Would her circumstances have been different, her struggles less, her financial security greater if they had saved the equivalent of the expenses for one dance a year? Could she have been in a position to support her children without leaving home for Havana, had the option to not work as a maid? Did Marta herself ever ponder these possibilities? If she did, she did not include them in her narrative. But if we as readers are searching for some explanation for the phenomenon of Marta’s world of make believe of the “Baile de las Flores,” a fantasy world that was paid for in real money, we may find some insights in the work of eminent African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. Indeed, the fantasy world of the “Baile de las Flores” provokes a dialogue with another world of make-believe in this same time period, the late 1940s and early 1950s, that Frazier was the first to identify, name and analyze in his book *Bourgeoisie Noire*, written originally in French and first published in France in 1955, and subsequently translated by the author and published as *Black Bourgeoisie* in English in the United States in 1957 (Frazier iv, 1).

Frazier was international in outlook and did research outside the United States, including a study of Brazilian society for the United Nations. But it was the African American community of his native United States that he knew best and studied most. Frazier’s thesis was simple, although it was initially received with great controversy by many Americans, black and white (1): a substantial segment of the so-called Negro middle class engage in “conspicuous consumption,” competing for social status and often spending beyond their means in a world of “make believe” they create for themselves to compensate for the psychological “annihilation” they suffered during slavery and for the racism, economic oppression and feelings of inferiority they continue to suffer (4, 195, 200). Frazier stressed the key role spending beyond one’s means played in constructing a world of make-believe. Note the uncanny congruence in Frazier’s usage of the word ‘society,’ (which he himself encloses in quotation marks to differentiate it from standard usage) and the poetic voice’s usage of ‘sociedad’ (society) in the song lyrics of “No, negrita, no...” in the first chapter of Pérez Sarduy’s novel quoted earlier in this analysis:

The activities of “society” serve to differentiate the black bourgeoisie from the masses of poorer Negroes and at the same time compensate for the exclusion of the black bourgeoisie from the larger white community. However, the behavior and standards of consumption which are

maintained by “society” generally lack the economic base which such activities presuppose. “Society” thus provides one of the main escapes from the world of reality into a world of make-believe. (195)

Since its original publication in the mid-1950s, Frazier’s study has been reprinted many times. It has become a classic of its genre and is still debated today. In a recent anthology of essays (2002) edited by James E. Teele, leading scholars re-evaluated the impact of Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie* in the new millennium. Only one of the contributors, Michael R. Winston, in his essay “E. Franklin Frazier’s Role in African Studies,” highlights the importance of Frazier’s writings on Africa, Brazil and the Caribbean in the 1940s, even speculating that Frazier’s contact with African intellectuals may have helped inspire the analytical model he developed in *Black Bourgeoisie* (Winston 137-138). It seems clear, however, from referring to Frazier’s model in a reading of “El baile de las flores,” that *Black Bourgeoisie* applies beyond the boundaries of the United States and its African American community; it provides a bridge and basis for dialogue between the histories and cultures of the Afro-Cuban and African American communities, and between the broader histories of Cuba and the United States.

In “El baile de las flores,” author Pedro Pérez Sarduy first offers the reader a text that exploits the long metaphorical tradition of the flower, especially in Spanish literature, as a point of departure, a point of intertextuality, a source of Bakhtinian dialogue. This tradition provides a richly textured tapestry as a background to re-interpret the evolving role of women, and Black women in particular, in pre-revolutionary Cuba. Next, the narrative, through its presentation of the role of social clubs, affords the reader a glimpse of both rigid and flexible aspects of racial and class hierarchy in Cuba. Then, in a narrative environment that depends heavily on the Caribbean island’s musical tradition to drive the events of the protagonist’s reflections, the reader experiences a literary crescendo of racial images in conflict. These images, which occur mainly in the poetic lyrics and titles of songs, together with the characters’ animated group response to the musical presentation of the images, enable the reader to share how Cubans of African descent ironically perceive their own cultural identity – in terms of race, class, and nationality. Finally, using the model developed by African American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier as a common point of reference, my analysis argues the existence of an uncanny parallel between how Afro-Cubans and African Americans created a social world of fantasy in response to the harsh racial realities of life in Cuba and in the United States, especially in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Both societies, as a rule, denied privilege, recognition, and access to people of African descent.

The two nations differ sharply in many respects, including language, culture, and history. Yet Frazier’s model allows us to delineate remarkable commonalities between Afro-Cubans and African Americans and their response to slavery and its aftermath into the 20th century. “El baile de las flores” (“The Floral Dance”) introduces us to pre-Revolutionary Cuba through the eyes of an Afro-Cuban female narrator. As the narrative proceeds to, and through, the Cuban Revolution in the chapters ahead, gradually approaching the end of the millennium, the reader will continue to be invited to make implicit and explicit comparisons between the African descended communities of Cuba and their diasporic counterparts in the United States.

NOTES

- ¹ All quotations from and references to Pedro Pérez Sarduy's novel are taken from the 2004 edition: see list of works cited at end.
- ² All translations from Spanish to English rendered by the author of this article, except where otherwise noted.

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Contact DAVID AKBAR GILLIAM: dgilliam@depaul.edu