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García Márquez's Afro-Columbian Literary Identity

Gabriel García Márquez refused to soften the harsh realities of a racially mixed and hierarchical society in his works *Love in the Time of Cholera* and *Of Love and Other Demons*. Part of this focus emerged out of his own journey to Afro-Colombian self-discovery. In 1978, García Márquez revealed in an interview, "I'm a mestizo... recognizing this fact made me see into myself and realize I'm a mestizo and at the same time made me start observing more clearly the historical conditions of our countries" (Bell-Villada 22). However, critics disagree over the efficacy of his treatment of racial issues, specifically in these two works, published in 1985 and 1994. Jeremy Cass describes García Márquez's treatment of race in *Love in the Time of Cholera* and *Of Love and Other Demons* as in one way participating "in a stereotypical portrayal of blacks," but encourages readers to "hunt for the more residual connections to the African influence that subtly inform García Márquez's body of work" (Cass 56-57). Steven Hunsaker, in his article "Representing the *mulata*: *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* and *tenda dos milagres*," disagrees with Cass and posits that in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, García Márquez actually reinforces the problematic conception of black women as seductresses whose only value is in their sex appeal. Gene Bell-Villada, a critic personally acquainted with García Márquez, acknowledges the "general array of mulatto extras and mistresses...especially [in] *Love in the Time of Cholera*," but adds that "his cast of African characters and evocation of their ways expands significantly in *Of Love and Other Demons*" (Bell-Villada 23). While critics disagree

about the results of García Márquez's characterization of African and mixed-race female characters, they do agree that in the time spent between writing the two novels, García Márquez became more focused on the conceptual treatment of Afro-Colombian identity.

What's largely missing in the Anglophone scholarly conversation, however, is a discussion of the literary shifts surrounding race in García Márquez's sequential works. By analyzing the literary treatment of race in these two novels, we can better understand García Márquez's conception of and depiction of African women, communities, and religion in his literature and culture, as well as his "exploration of the solitude and lack of communication [between races] which form the base of the author's mature fiction" (Cass 56). As he grows in maturity and knowledge of his own racial identity, he grows in empathy for the discriminated "other." I aim to show that this growing empathy is specifically and concretely traceable in his writing, through a noticeable change in diction, descriptors, allusions, and symbolism.

By comparing *Love in the Time of Cholera* to *Of Love and Other Demons*, readers will notice that García Márquez's diction surrounding African women undergoes a significant shift. He moves from describing his female African characters solely from an outside, denigrating perspective to portraying them holistically. In the earlier-published *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the three central African female characters are initially described through a male voice. David Brookshaw writes that "[the black woman in Latin American fiction] is respected neither as a woman nor as an individual" (Hunsaker 225). Tellingly, García Márquez never uses the word "woman" as an initial descriptor for Leona Cassiani or Bárbara Lynch, two significant African characters featured in *Love in the Time of Cholera*; rather, Cassiani is dubbed a "slave girl," a "whore," a "loose woman," and a "dancer," and Lynch is tersely called a "mulata" (García Márquez 182, 241). While Lynch does refer to herself as a woman, she includes the degrading

modifiers “poor” and “black” (García Márquez 243). These self-applied appellations contribute a negative overtone to an already skewed narration.

Additionally, Cassiani is described as a “lioness in the streets;” an image that conjures jungle-themed visuals of a desperate streetwalker prowling the market (García Márquez 186). Lynch too is described as being like a “mangrove swamp” and “the air of a recumbent forest glade,” reinforcing exotic imagery of nature and playing up her barbaric qualities, which her first name, Bárbara, echoes (García Márquez 246). This confirms Richard Jackson’s comment that in Latin American fiction, the mulata “becomes a sexually uninhibited amoral animal full of sensual *jungle* rhythm, oozing sex through *animal* eyes, sensual voice, and inviting flesh” (Hunsaker 225). By allowing the African women in *Love in the Time of Cholera* to be reduced to animals or sex objects, García Márquez reinforces the stereotypical role of the oppressed African woman.

However, in his later work, *Of Love and Other Demons*, readers observe less sexual characterization applied and more agency given to African women. Dominga de Adviento, the main African character in *Of Love and Other Demons*, is characterized in flat statements about her intellectual value, never about her sexual value. In direct contrast to the narration of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the first word used to describe Adviento is “woman.” Also, rather than being dubbed a “poor black woman,” Adviento is characterized as a “formidable black woman” who “ruled the house [of the Marquis] with an iron fist,” perhaps erring on the side of tyranny instead of complete disenfranchisement (García Márquez 11). Instead of emphasizing her seductive qualities, García Márquez tells the reader that she is “tall and bony, possessed of an almost clairvoyant intelligence” (García Márquez 11). Her intelligence is prioritized on the narrative level, effectively reinforcing the fact that she is a human being, possessing intelligence

and power. Her name is distinctly religious as well—translating roughly to “Sunday of Advent,” “Dominga de Adviento” is a name that distances the woman from any barbaric, jungle imagery, and, as Carolyn Ureña argues, signals “the birth of a savior” in a distinctly Christian way (Ureña 99). This Christian association contributes to the culture-bridging, empowered quality of Adviento, who “became a Catholic without renouncing her Yoruban beliefs...because what she did not find in one faith was there in the other” (García Márquez 11). The fact that a slave woman’s beliefs are discussed as possessing authority (Adviento “baptized [Sierva María] in Christ and consecrated her to Olokun”) is a telling foray into a more racially inclusive narrative (García Márquez 11).

Meanwhile, the other biologically African woman in *Of Love and Other Demons* is an enigmatic figure that is simply called “the Abyssinian slave” by García Márquez. Unlike the jubilant, impetuous slave women of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the Abyssinian woman is a lone character, distant from the narrator and from the other characters in the novel, foreshadowing the isolation that surrounds the slave community. She, like Cassiani and Lynch, is never called a woman, but is characterized solely as a “slave,” a “female,” and a “vision” (García Márquez 8, 98). Even so, this absence of stated womanhood does not sexualize the slave as much as it recognizes the existence of her latent power. In the case of the Abyssinian woman, “slave” is a factual designation that simply describes a state of being. In addition, in the Columbian slave trade, Abyssinian slaves were often characterized as having great physical strength and fighting ability (“Ḥabshī”). We see this concept in the text; the Abyssinian slave does indeed have “the equivocal bearing of a Roman gladiator” existing just under the surface of her helplessness (García Márquez 8). Her vulnerability, which overcomes the powerful Viceroy, showcases her true strength as she suffers indignity, rather than overtly sexualizing her. Also, García Márquez

makes a point to establish that she was not defined by her “age and the state of her health” by the slavers who are attempting to sell her, markers which he continuously uses to define every black woman in *Love in the Time of Cholera*. This shift in narrative style references a more inclusive, humanizing outlook on African women as individuals who are more than sex objects or exotic outsiders.

García Márquez’s descriptions of the slave quarters are the same in both *Love in the Time of the Cholera* and *Of Love and Other Demons*, but he tellingly transitions from negative descriptors for the slave population into dignified appellations that humanize the slaves between his novels. In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Dr. Urbino makes his way through the “*tumult* of the old slave quarter,” filled with a marsh that is described as “oppressive,” “ominous,” “suffocating,” “wretched,” and “desolate” (García Márquez 11). In *Of Love and Other Demons*, the slave quarters were more briefly described as “staggering in its misery,” a place where “children drank from the swamp in the streets” (García Márquez 133).

Yet the slaves who reside in the quarters are described differently in the two works. The slaves in *Love in the Time of Cholera* described as “tumultuous” and “godless,” “drunken,” “ragged,” “riotous” (García Márquez 11). Later, the slaves, described as “poor mulattoes,” and “impetuous mob,” “tumultuously abandoned” their homes in “jubilant assault” (García Márquez 17). The words “abandoned” and “assault” carry indisputably negative connotations, but the juxtaposition with adjectives of a positive nature (jubilant) seems to hint at the carefree irresponsibility of the slave community, who want nothing more than to “[dance] without mercy, [drink] themselves blind...[make] wild love...and [break] up their own party with bloody free-for-alls” (García Márquez 17). This characterization of slaves limits their experience to pagan orgies filled with violence and sex. Critic Katherine Thomas describes this view as “a colonial

mentality...[that has] been inherited from the European Renaissance” (Thomas 17). García Márquez himself, in his Nobel address, emphasizes the isolating, enslaving effect of a single “interpretation of our reality” for Colombian nationals, and by extension, Afro-Colombian citizens (Ortega 88). However, in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the slaves are problematically characterized as dwellers in a world separate from the civilized realm, a violent world of outlaws that is isolated from the rest of the city. To be African is to be isolated.

In *Of Love and Other Demons*, on the other hand, the people within the slave district are described as “radiant voices,” and significantly, “residents”—with these positive associations, they are given dignity (García Márquez 133). While they are members of “the liveliest district,” rather than flocking to wild parties, the slaves in *Of Love and Other Demons* “carried chairs into the middle of the street to enjoy the cool air” (García Márquez 133). This telling posture of calm carries over even into their dancing—in direct contrast to the “jubilant assault” of the slaves in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, García Márquez writes in *Of Love and Other Demons* that “it was difficult to imagine dancing more silent than that of the Marquis’s slaves” (García Márquez 12).

Meanwhile, within the slave population at the abbey in *Of Love and Other Demons*, we see a subversive culture that does seem to mimic the slaves’ wild behavior in *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Rather than simply reinforcing stereotypes, however, the symbolic nature of the slaves’ rebellious behavior signals the human response to a communication gap between one world and another. The slaves at the convent in *Of Love and Other Demons* take Sierva to the “tumultuous kitchen,” which serves as the slave quarters of this scene. The slaves welcome her with jubilation and commence eating, gambling, and singing. This joyful phenomenon is not limited to the slaves, however. Under the influence of Sierva María, the nuns themselves are transformed into a community that mimics that of the slaves of *Love in the Time of Cholera*. The nuns begin

gambling, drinking and smoking under the influence of Sierva María; García Márquez writes that “never before had life in the convent been so agitated and free” (García Márquez 70). One explanation for this impetuous slave and nun behavior at the nunnery is that the oppression of the slave populace leads to this sort of subversive response. It is significant that this raucous community originates in the convent that itself is kept segregated from the city, among the slaves that are forced into social isolation. Ultimately, Thomas and Ureña both argue that both the solitude and oppression of South America itself and Sierva María, the embodiment of the duality of the realms of the slaves and the aristocracy, lead to what Ureña calls “transgressive and border-crossing activity necessary to oppose dualist thinking and being” (Ureña 91).

Finally, García Márquez treats African religion and witchcraft as an evil force in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, but transitions into a more sensitive religious analysis in *Of Love and Other Demons*. There is only one instance of African religious practices in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, and it is manifested as an evil spell. Fermina Daza receives a black doll from an unknown sender. The doll seems to embody the appearance of the aristocracy—“it was dressed in an exquisite gown, its hair rippled with gold threads,” but it slowly starts growing into an “atrocious” (García Márquez 125). Immediately, Daza concludes that the doll was a frightening “African spell” (García Márquez 125). This event goes unaddressed in the rest of the novel, leaving readers with a characterization of African religious beliefs as evil witchcraft. This fits with what we know of Colombia’s attitude towards African elements even today, as Bell-Villada notes in his discussion of the country: he writes that “the vestigial legacy of white chauvinism and Bogotá snobbery...slight a region precisely because of its African element” (García Márquez 23).

The imagery and diction surrounding African, specifically Yoruba, religious practices in *Of Love and Other Demons* is much more positive. From the very first, African religion is seen as what Mary Kate Azcuy calls the religion of “pure beings that the fictions of the Church cannot harm” (Azcuy 19). Several slaves are bitten by the rabies-afflicted dog at the beginning of the novel, and “the population of blacks...spirited away the victims to cure them by African magic in the settlements of runaway slaves” (García Márquez 13). Thus, African rituals are depicted as healing rather than frightening. The existence of positive African power terrifies the Catholic church, which then attacks the African culture, “the habits and languages of the black slaves in which [Sierva María] participates...as demonic” (Vasquez Medina 169). The Bishop explicitly calls racial mixing with “blacks of every sort...snares of the Enemy” (García Márquez 102).

The difference between the two works of literature is that in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, this misconception of African customs as demonic is allowed to go unaddressed. In *Of Love and Other Demons*, García Márquez clearly places African religious practices in a positive light, contrasted with the evils of the Catholic faith, which his character Abrenuncio calls “even worse [than] the witchcraft of the blacks” (García Márquez 72). His critique of the Catholic church in *Of Love and Other Demons* parallels with his villainization of misunderstood African customs in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, as his depiction of African American women simultaneously shifts towards a more humanizing perspective. Perhaps most significantly, however, García Márquez drastically employs more dignifying diction when writing about African slave communities in *Of Love and Other Demons*. In writing about the isolation of African slave communities, but developing the community-building power latent in those oppressed in his later work, García Márquez is perhaps constructing a political statement about Latin America and its Afro-Colombian community. His awareness of Latin American isolation among literary and cultural

voices, which parallels to the Afro-Colombian community in his own fiction, is evident in his Nobel Prize speech. “The interpretation of [the Latin American] reality through patterns not our own serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary,” García Márquez wrote; indeed, in the works examined here, García Márquez noticeably improves in his attempt to disrupt the “rational talents” of the Western narrative and to interpret the Afro-Colombian reality through new patterns of dignity (Ortega 89).

Ultimately, we see that as García Márquez grows and changes in his perception of his own and his nation’s underpublicized Afro-Caribbean heritage, his literary treatment of indigenous African individuals, communities, and religious practices becomes more inclusive and dignifying as a direct result of his growing empathy. This is remarkable: readers are able to concretely trace García Márquez’s own growing understanding of the struggles and isolation of the discriminated Afro-Colombian community in his literature. As he grows in both his own racial and cultural self-identity and in comparing the lonely realities of the African reality in the Colombian context in relation to Latin America’s solitary reality in the global context, his literary treatment of Afro-Colombian women, communities, and religion experiences a noticeable positive shift.

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