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Se dice pelo bueno: Black Affirmations in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

May 12, 2020

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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Black Denial in Puerto Rico	4
1.2 “Folkloric” Blackness	7
2. Affirming Mestizaje in Carmen L. Montañez’s novel <i>Pelo bueno, pelo malo</i>	9
3. Affirming Black Hair in Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro’s <i>Pelo bueno</i>	18
4. Affirming Black Identities, Bodies, and Histories in Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro’s Forthcoming Poetry Collection <i>Afrofeministamente</i>	25
5. Conclusion	35
6. Bibliography	37

Abstract

In recent years, the natural hair movement has demanded social, political, and cultural acceptance of Black hair on a global scale. Particularly in the Hispanophone Caribbean, the natural hair movement has been a tool to not only promote the acceptance of curly, kinky hair but to combat Latin America's anti-Blackness. I have found that although Black hair in the Hispanophone Caribbean is constantly compared to textures found in nature such as wool and *pajón*, it has also been regarded as unnatural. My work has been largely inspired by the essay "Beyond *blanqueamiento*: black affirmation in contemporary Puerto Rico," in which Hilda Lloréns employs an affirmative anthropology framework to illustrate how Black Puerto Ricans maintain and affirm their Blackness in a racist society that works to reject and marginalize them. This is what I see as the contribution of my work to be: to highlight how nonfolkloric, contemporary literary affirmations of Blackness serve as an additional resistance strategy to counter *blanqueamiento*. In that spirit, I will be examining three recent literary works from Puerto Rico that center on the theme of Black hair and identity: the novel *Good Hair, Bad Hair* by Carmen L. Montañez (2016), the illustrated children's book *Pelo bueno* by the renowned novelist Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro (2018), as well as three poems that will appear in Arroyo Pizarro's forthcoming poetry collection *Afrofeministamente*, which were published online in March of 2020.

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“When you write, it’s like braiding your hair.
Taking a handful of coarse unruly strands and attempting to bring them unity.”
— Edwidge Danticat, *Krik? Krak!*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the natural hair movement has demanded social, political, and cultural acceptance of Black hair on a global scale. Journalist Starrene Rhet Rocque recalls that in the early 2000s, Black women in the United States formed online communities and support networks in which they could exchange styling tips and haircare routines for their natural hair (Rocque).¹ It was not until a decade ago when the popularity of these online forums, blogs, and video tutorials began to have global influence and marketable reach that the natural hair community was recognized as the natural hair movement. In 2016, Carolina Contreras, notoriously known as Miss Rizos, opened up the first natural hair salon in the Dominican Republic with the goal to empower more people in the Latin American region to embrace their kinky, curly hair and Blackness. Miss Rizos is evidence of the growing natural hair movement in the Spanish speaking Caribbean led by Black Latin American womxn who longer want to conform to Euro-centric standards of beauty.² Particularly in the Hispanophone Caribbean, the natural hair movement has been a tool not only to promote the acceptance of curly and kinky hair but to combat Latin America's anti-Blackness more broadly. I have found that although Black hair in the Hispanophone Caribbean is constantly compared to textures found in nature such as wool and *pajón*, it has also been regarded as unnatural.³

The title of my thesis, *Se dice pelo bueno: Black Affirmations in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature*, seeks to reject the phrase “*pelo malo*” (“bad hair”) and appropriate “*pelo bueno*” (“good hair”) into our understanding of Black hair. Black Latin Americans continue to be

¹ Natural hair is a term that refers to curly and kinky hair that has not been chemically straightened, permed, relaxed or pressed.

² Womxn is an alternative spelling of woman that is inclusive of trans, nonbinary, and woman-identified persons regardless of their assigned sex at birth.

³ The *pajón* is used to compare afros to the shape of a mop head. A *pajón* (*holcus lanatus*) is a perennial grass that spreads by forming new shoots and roots in the form of mop shapes.

policed and punished for the way their hair naturally grows and are constantly reprimanded for having “*pelo malo*.” “*Pelo malo*” (“bad hair”) is an expression that targets and shames the appearance of kinky, curly hair. This shame is internalized and then manifests as a looming fear of having one’s hair labeled as “bad” which suggests that hair holds a moral essence reflective of a person’s value in society. And thus, we straighten, press, conceal, and torture our kinks and curls.

Curly hair is, of course, not an exclusively Black phenotype. When I say Black hair, I am referring to the racialization of hair textures such as curly and kinky as traits that define Black people. It seems that White and other non-Black people are free to have “bad hair days” without having to routinely punish their hair and bodies to conform to a state of perceived “goodness.” However, the hair of Black people, and especially Black womxn, no matter how neat or styled, gets characterized as “bad” – not just for a day, but for life. As bell hooks observes, “white women have lots of issues about their hair, but they also have lots of affirmation for their hair. [Black people] don’t have the overall cultural affirmation that counters the negative obsession” (Byrd and Tharps 148). As such, the representations and discourses centered around Black people’s hair negatively influence the relationships we have with our bodies.

In this thesis, I am not interested in representations of Blackness in Puerto Rican literature as much as I am in Black affirmations of it. While positive representations of Black people are necessary in combating anti-Black sentiments, they simply will never do enough to remedy the racism we experience. Often times “representation” is rooted in the desire to prove our humanity to our oppressors. In this way, representation is more about re-scripting the gaze of White, cis, and straight people who continue to control the dominant narrative and not so much about celebrating and validating each other.

The phrase “*pelo malo*” is an example of racist language commonplace in Latin America that empowers the preferred phenotypes of Whiteness. “*Pelo malo*” suggests that Blackness is undesirable, unacceptable, and not worthy of admiration while again associating negative moral connotations with Black people. Over time, this message becomes internalized and Blackness is accepted as inferior by both Black and non-Black peoples. Racist language denies the visibility and legitimacy of Blackness in Latin America and excludes Black aesthetics, history, and contributions in national identity making. The social cost of celebrating Blackness has always been violent at public, private, and political levels. As such, whether intentional or not, Black people wearing their natural hair is an act of resistance.

My work has been largely inspired by the essay “Beyond *blanqueamiento*: Black Affirmation in Contemporary Puerto Rico,” in which Hilda Lloréns employs an affirmative anthropology framework to illustrate how Black Puerto Ricans maintain and affirm their Blackness in a racist society that works to reject and marginalize them. *Blanqueamiento* or “whitening” refers to the deliberate process of Whitening phenotypes and family lineage through interracial marriages with the goal of achieving a higher social status. Lloréns argues that Puerto Rico’s Black collective consciousness has been considerably unexplored beyond *blanqueamiento*. In her essay, she identifies the “master narratives” that have contributed to the historical denial of Blackness in Puerto Rico. Through two decades’ worth of ethnographic research, she is able to counter them, highlighting stories and practices of resistance to show how Black Puerto Ricans affirm their Blackness through linguistic practices, “marrying Black,” creating and maintaining Black spaces, developing psychological and psychosocial fortitude, celebrating Black identity, culture, and history, as well as creating “non-folkloric” artistic

affirmations of Black identity.⁴ Lloréns understand these practices not only as counter-*blanqueamiento* adaptations to racism, but also as vital strategies to maintain and affirm a Black identity. In the following paragraphs, I detail how my work engages with Lloréns on the topic of Black denial and affirmation.

1.1 Black Denial in Puerto Rico

In this thesis, I seek to define and recognize *mestizaje* as a neocolonial project and function of Spanish colonialism that favors Christianized Whiteness and claims racial equality and colorblindness while erasing and marginalizing both Indigeneity and Blackness. Puerto Rico's claims of being a racial paradise are false, as Black people since slavery have documented and expressed their experiences with racial violence on the island. As a result of the political, social, and cultural implications of racism, Afro-Puerto Ricans have created separate ways to navigate Puerto Rican identity and aesthetics. Lloréns' work has inspired me to analyze how Puerto Rican literature that affirms Black identity can serve as a Black affirmation strategy. Therefore, this thesis attempts to engage Puerto Rican literature and writers who are unafraid to say that there is, in fact, a different racial experience on the island for Black Puerto Ricans, and to explore the tools they provide to continue combatting anti-Blackness on the island.

Lloréns identifies three "master narratives" that contribute to the historical denial of Blackness in Puerto Rico. The first is what terms "fugitive blackness," the idea that Blackness in Puerto Rico is foreign or unrepresentative of the culture's identity. The second refers to what anthropologist Isar Godreau has called the "benevolent-slavery" theory – the myth that

⁴ Psychological fortitude refers to a set of "positive personal tools, states of mind, and thinking that assists individuals in building a healthy sense of self-worth" (Lloréns 170). Psychosocial fortitude refers to "positive life circumstances, events, coping mechanisms, optimism, and social support that aid individuals in crafting meaningful lives" (170). These terms are further explained in Lloréns's work.

historically, Black Puerto Ricans did not suffer as much as enslaved peoples in North America because of the “leniency” of Spanish Catholicism. The third “master narrative” has to do with the view that Afro-Puerto Ricans expressing or claiming a Black identity are acting on a harmful outside or United States influence.

However, focusing on just these frames of reference further ignores the hundreds of years of Black resistance and affirmation in Puerto Rico. Lloréns shares that her affirmative approach and research attempt to:

First, to break away from an anthropology that focuses exclusively on deficits of a population to investigate assets people deploy in carving out good and meaningful lives... The second aim is to acknowledge and privilege the voices of black Puerto Ricans and the self-affirmations of their identities. I demonstrate that although black Puerto Ricans may at times appear to accept the myth that Puerto Rico is a racial democracy, many nonetheless reproduce and forge a black identity in both private and public arenas. Although in principle racial democracies might support the expression of multiple racial identities, Puerto Rico’s version precludes support of race-based identities. Instead, it highlights creolization and *mestizaje* as a unifying factor and stands as the marker of Puertorriqueñidad (Puertoricanness). (Lloréns 165)

As Lloréns states, the process of *blanqueamiento* and *mestizaje* (miscegenation or racial mixing) has allowed Puerto Rico to view itself as an example of a post-racial paradise. Thus, affirming a Black identity in Puerto Rico is seen as challenging the racist narratives that protect this “post-racial paradise”. The pressure to maintain social and economic upward mobility pressures Black Puerto Ricans to support *mestizaje* ideology in hopes to gain access to mainstream society. Black Puerto Ricans are expected to negotiate and conceal their Blackness for the “good” of the nation. The myth of a racial democracy in Puerto Rico further reinforces that rejecting Blackness is necessary for an “authentic” Puerto Rican identity.

In the early twentieth century, Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos proposed in his influential book *La raza cósmica* (1925) that it was Latin America’s destiny to erase racial hierarchy through *mestizaje* or racial mixing. He envisioned the emergence of a “definitive

race... made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples,” which would become “the moral and material basis for the union of all men into a fifth universal race” (38, 60). Vasconcelos’s Cosmic Race theory is representative of the historic tolerance of racial mixing in Spanish America. Its rhetoric informed understandings of a Spanish-speaking Latin American continental identity, as well as the mestizo nationalism that emerged across the Latin American region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While mestizo nationalism celebrates racial and cultural mixing in way that contrasts White supremacy in United States, its hegemonic pressure created new forms of discrimination and oppression. In *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America*, historian John Charles Chasteen points out that while *mestizaje* embraces elements of Indigenous and African peoples, it is still problematic:

There are many differences *within* countries as *between* them. Whose accent, whose music, whose cuisine, whose skin tone get to represent the whole nation? According to Mexican nationalist ideology, a mestizo is now considered somehow more Mexican than others born in Mexico. Many other Latin American nations have instituted this quasi-official mestizo self-image. The mestizo image does describe many, perhaps most, Latin Americans, but it marginalizes others. In the Dominican Republic, for example, the mixed-race image excludes people of strong African descent, especially immigrants from Haiti, who appear “too black to be Dominican.” In Mexico, Central American, and the Andes, it excludes indigenous people, pushing them to “stop being Indians,” adopt a mestizo identity, and enter the national mainstream. (328)

In that same vein, *Puertorriqueñidad* as a national identity promotes the idea that Puerto Ricans are genetically a “perfect” mix of Spanish, Taíno, and African people. But in fact, Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries have “folklorized” their African heritage in order to distance their national identity from Blackness.⁵ All of these strategies seek to erase or deny Blackness in favor of a mestizo vision of national identity. In this understanding, the affirmation or claiming of a Black racial identity is frowned upon, as it challenges Puerto Rico’s assertion that race has no

⁵ The Taino are the Indigenous Arawakan-speaking peoples who inhabited the Greater Antilles prior to the “discovery” of the Caribbean region and were violently conquered as a result of European colonization.

cultural importance and therefore denies the presence of racial discrimination. Black Puerto Ricans are expected to “stop being Black” in order to fully embrace and be included in *Puertorriqueñidad*.

1.2 “Folkloric” Blackness

One of the key observations in Lloréns’ essay is that Puerto Rican society tends to accept only “folkloric” depictions of Blackness. These “folkloric” images of Puerto Rico’s African heritage are not only relegated to the past but historically Black neighborhoods and practices such as *bomba* and *plena* musical performances are packaged as Black “experiences” to tourists and “put on ‘display’ as authentic black spaces within the culture market by governmental agencies trying to promote cultural tourism” (170). These White-washed depictions of Blackness do not disturb the racial harmony that Puerto Rico performs and reinforce the idea of an accepting Puerto Rican culture. Lloréns notes that in this culture market “black identity and black products become una manera de defenderse economicamente (an economically viable defense strategy)” (170) as Black communities accept the money because of the lack of access to economic opportunities as a result of racial discrimination. In these folkloric depictions Blackness becomes monolithic; however, Lloréns observes that there are artistic efforts being produced that affirm Blackness in Puerto Rico to combat this folklorization. These works reject folklorization as they “do not image black Puerto Ricans living in inhumane conditions but offer a visual record of empowerment, cultural traditions, beliefs, and spirituality” (172). This is what I see as the contribution of my work to be: to highlight how nonfolkloric, contemporary literary affirmations of Blackness serve as an additional resistance strategy to counter blanqueamiento. In that spirit, I will be examining three recent literary works from Puerto Rico that center on the

theme of Black hair and identity: the novel *Good Hair, Bad Hair* by Carmen L. Montañez (2016), the illustrated children's book *Pelo bueno* by the renowned novelist Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro (2018), as well as three poems that will appear in Arroyo Pizarro's forthcoming poetry collection *Afrofeministamente*, which were published online in March of 2020.

2. Affirming Mestizaje in Carmen L. Montañez's Novel *Pelo bueno, pelo malo*

Carmen L. Montañez's chick lit novel *Good Hair, Bad Hair*, published in Spanish as *Pelo bueno, pelo malo* in 2006 and in English translation in 2012, unfolds from the first-personal narrative of a young Puerto Rican woman obsessed with straightening her curly hair and finding a suitable marriage prospect.⁶ Amarilis Almodóvar is a mixed-race Puerto Rican in her late twenties who, after reflecting on her failed romantic relationships, turns to generic Internet rituals to help facilitate her quest for eternal love. As a result of practicing these rituals, Amarilis's ancestors—a Yoruba woman, a Taíno woman, and a Spanish woman – begin to communicate with her through dreams that illustrate their experiences during the era of Spanish colonialism in Puerto Rico.⁷ These dreams expose the violence of this era and force Amarilis to reflect on *mestizaje*. After invoking a series of love spells with no luck, Amarilis's friend Janina sets her up with a man named Omar and a spark is lit.

As Amarilis's confidence in the rituals grow, her relationship with Omar begins to heat up as well. The chemistry between the two is perfect until Omar shares his mother's obsession with last names, which reveals her concern with maintaining a White bloodline and therefore a higher social status. When Omar asks if Amarilis's hair is naturally straight, she becomes offended and ends the relationship, understanding that he, too, has inherited prejudices from his family and is wondering if she comes from a family of "good" or "bad" hair. The novel ends with Amarilis no longer practicing the rituals and begins to exchange emails with an American, in which she proudly confirms that she has black, curly hair. Montañez's *Good Hair, Bad Hair*

⁶ Chick lit, or chick literature, is a genre of fiction that "consists of heroine-centered narratives that focus on the trials and tribulations of their individual protagonists" (Smith 2) often in a lighthearted and humorous spirit.

⁷ I'd like to stress that these ancestors are representative of Puerto Rico's Spanish colonial era and not the current neocolonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico.

exemplifies the stigma of curly hair and its fixture as a racial marker in Puerto Rican culture. However, the story does more to affirm *mestizaje* than to affirm Blackness.

The story utilizes the experiences of three generations of Puerto Rican women to underline the varied cultural attitudes towards Black hair. In a conversation after the sudden death of Amarilis's father, her mother Amalia draws attention to the racist sentiments her own mother had towards kinky hair textures:

“I married the man of my dreams,” she said with a sad voice, “not even when my mother told me that he was *grifo*. I always remember the day she told me, “if you marry that man, you are going to comb *griferia*...”

“You see, Grandma was right,” said Amarilis, showing her mother a lock of her black and curly hair.

“But, Amarilis, what do you mean? You have beautiful hair,” her mother said, tenderly caressing her daughter's hair.

“Because you look at me with eyes of love, but some people don't look at me like that. I remember one day when I was around sixteen, a man, a very romantic one, made a flirtatious remark to me, ‘Good-bye, my kinky-haired beauty,’” said Amarilis with a trace of anger in her voice.

“Forget it, it's not worth remembering it. I loved your father like he was, and I've given my whole life for you without thinking what your hair is like,” her mother said with sincere voice. (5)

Pablo's race is introduced to the story by Amalia recalling how her mother referred to him as *grifo*— a usually derogatory term used to describe people with kinky hair— noting that his Blackness would be a quality that Amalia would have to “deal” with. Amarilis's grandmother's rejection of Pablo based on his hair texture illustrates just how normalized these racist attitudes are. Amalia rejects her own mother's discriminatory ideology and expresses unconditional love and acceptance of both her late husband and mixed-race daughter. Although she asserts that she loved Pablo regardless of his hair or race, she tells Amarilis that discriminatory behavior towards her Blackness is “not worth remembering” and therefore invalidates her daughters' anger. In this way, Amalia represents a generation of Puerto Ricans who are aware of their culture's discriminatory behavior but chose to love blindly— still naturalizing Blackness as a fault but

condemning the discrimination. Amarilis, who since her youth has experienced racially charged microaggressions, represents the myriad of possibilities for younger generations who are left to reflect and grapple with their culture's prejudiced history.⁸

The rituals that Amarilis performs act as spaces for the protagonist to confront her multi-racial self. In her rituals, Amarilis engages with affirmations of beauty as well as a series of prayers and baths. The first full description of Amarilis's appearance appears during her first ritual, while she is reflecting on her naked body's image in the mirror:

I have kind of a mixed nose, and sometimes I see it well profiled, but like my mother says it depends on what angle you see it. But it's not ugly, it's not flat like Celia Cruz's nose. I've learned how to camouflage it with makeup... You can see all my Taino roots on my forehead. It slants back... gives me an indigenous look that I like. My cheekbones are also rather mixed high cheekbones like black women... gives me the appearance of a strong woman and man killer...

Now focus on the prayer... Now with my fingertip I wet my head, my mouth, and the center of my heart, amen, amen, amen. Hmm! Like a trinity— that is what I am, a trinity, and I am god inside myself... (16-18).

Amarilis is able to recognize her mixed nose but exclaims that it's not "ugly" like that of the Cuban singer Celia Cruz (an unambiguously Black, proud, and prominent icon of Afro-Latin America). She exoticizes her African and Taíno ancestry by distinguishing how they physically show up on her body. Although the word "mixed" is mentioned twice in this section, there are no descriptions in the novel that exemplify Amarilis's European ancestry. This exclusion reinforces the illusion that Whiteness is the default, the norm, and therefore uncountable. By attempting to harmonize the African, Taíno, and Spanish cultures through Amarilis's body, Montañez relies on the idea of *mestizaje*, in which one has to negotiate their Blackness in order to protect their Puerto Ricanness.

⁸ Microaggressions can be defined as the "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue 5).

In Brenda Ortiz-Loyola's article "Straight or Curly? Hair and Race in Carmen

Montañez's *Pelo bueno, pelo malo*," she argues that:

Even though Amarilis mentions things that she likes and things that she doesn't, her final words display a degree of satisfaction that is absent from other narratives: "¡Me gustas, condená! . . . Mira, que me quejo de mi suerte . . . mirándome bien, no soy fea y tengo un cuerpo aceptable . . . no soy una Jennifer López, pero ahí vamos" (29–30) ["Damn girl, you look great!" I'm always complaining about my luck... looking carefully at myself, I'm not ugly, and I have an acceptable body... I'm not Jennifer Lopez, but hey, I'm almost there.] More importantly, her description reveals a transformation in the concept of beauty while alluding to her mixed-race origin. Thick lips, previously considered too African, are now in vogue. From Amarilis's perspective, this change inverts the sense of longing usually attributed to Afro-descendants. Now white women want to have something they lack, and that feature is linked in the Puerto Rican consciousness to blackness. Equally, her forehead and her cheeks highlight an indigenous and black ancestry that she embraces. Consistent with the paradigm Amarilis offers, someone of Hispanic origin like Jennifer López—and not a white fashion model—embodies beauty. (Ortiz-Loyola 426)

I think it's important to note that the context in which Amarilis is praising her physical features relies on her racial ambiguity. Features such as Amarilis's "*bembita*" (thick lips) on a mixed or White person's body are often praised but will still continue to be criticized on the body of an unambiguously Black person. Amarilis states that her mixed nose looks different depending on "what angle you see it" and considers it pretty in comparison to Celia Cruz's "ugly" and "flat" (that is, undeniably Black) nose. That is a rejection of her Blackness, not an embracement of it. Amarilis is more comfortable likening her appearance to someone like Jennifer Lopez, who has been able to pass as White in her major film productions. While I do agree with Ortiz-Loyola that "Amarilis doesn't intend to transform herself into a white person" (426), the protagonist's understanding of ugliness is rooted in anti-Blackness, and her framing of beauty is closely tied to its proximity to Whiteness. Amarilis's paradigm is not a shift from Hispanic Caribbean culture's anti-Blackness, but a direct reflection of the way that it has been able to cover itself as just a "personal preference" and not the result of hundreds of years of violent *blanqueamiento*.

When it comes to Amarilis's own attitudes towards her hair, it is hard to understand where her pride in a "trinity" of self comes when so much of it is reliant on her concealing her blackness:

I hope that tomorrow will be a better day even though I should watch the weather report to know if it's going to rain tomorrow. Oh! I can see it tomorrow morning. If it's rainy, I'll put my hair back and this way I can avoid having a meltdown with myself and my entire race over a bad hair day. (18)

Amarilis's tracking of the weather is an attempt to avoid any and all situations that may reveal her naturally curly hair. Her strategies underline a relationship in which Amarilis views her hair as a source of conflict which she must always prepare for. Along with keeping tabs on the weather, Amarilis strategically arranges her hair for work and nights out so that her "griferia doesn't mess up" (31). It is hard to believe that Amarilis straightening her hair is simply an expression or extension of her style when the worry over her curls is an everyday mission.

Amarilis's complex with her hair is so potent that even her friends point it out, which causes her to reflect on the fixation:

I mean, in my opinion, maybe my friends are right. I'm kind of obsessed with my hair. I should accept myself as the horoscope said. Anyhow, I need to take care of myself, and one way is having my hair fixed up and healthy. Besides, this gives me self-confidence. (37)

In this excerpt, Amarilis sets out to pamper herself with oil treatments and hair rollers after a night out dancing. Although Amarilis claims this is an act of self-care, straightening natural hair has no health benefits and can lead to irreversible damage of curl patterns. Straightening her curly hair and concealing her Blackness help prevent the racist remarks she experienced with past lovers and catcallers on the streets. While getting ready for a date with Omar, Amarilis decides to alter her appearance and hair based on her partner Omar's preferences: "Ay! My hair. Should I put it up or let it loose? Something is telling me that I should wear it loose today. He let

me know that he likes women with a long, flowing mane” (81). This act further asserts that Amarilis’s relationship with straightening her hair is influenced by the opinions of people around her and not of her own accord. While straightening one’s curly hair is not necessarily an act of Whitewashing or inherent anti-Blackness, Amarilis’s constant concealing and deprecation of her Black hair and “mixed nose” leaves little to convince readers that our protagonist truly embraces her multi-racial self. This language mirrors both the exotification and rejection of African ancestry in Puerto Rican folklore and culture.

Good Hair, Bad Hair has been praised for its celebration of Puerto Rico’s racial mixture. However, its folkloric retelling of Puerto Rico’s Spanish colonial period relies on exoticizing clichés of the African and Taíno experiences. The dream sequences which occur after Amarilis completes a ritual begin with a nameless Taíno woman who is trying to make sense of the Spanish conquistador’s visits:

The supreme Agüeybana had a mix of happiness and fear... our priests couldn’t explain with certainty of what was happening in our history...

Among the strangers, there was a young man who was looking at me intensely. He was a lot taller than our men. His hair was light colored, and his eyes were fair too. I had never seen a man with such a perfect nose... I don’t know how to classify him, but for me he was like an apparition from the clouds because of his skin color that wasn’t dark. The brightness of his skin produced a light that wasn’t dark. Besides him, our men looked darker. I felt his gaze following me, and I went inside the *bohío*. It wasn’t that I disliked his stare. But honestly, it scared me. (24)

These dreams romanticize the origin of racial mixing in Puerto Rico. Amarilis’s Taíno ancestor understands that these visits from the Spanish will alter the history of her people, but is unsure whether this is a good or bad occurrence. Although she is unsure of how to classify the young Spaniard, her praises illustrate the myth of White superiority upon first contact. She cannot stop talking about how light and fair his skin, eyes, and hair are— even calling his nose “perfect” and likening him to an “apparition from the clouds,” a remarkable and unexpected sight. This

“apparition” image plays into the myth that Indigenous peoples believed the Spaniards were gods and thus affirms the belief that White people are morally and intellectually superior. In contrast to Celia Cruz’s Black nose referenced earlier, this Spaniard man’s nose is “perfect.” These adjectives reflect the Hispanophone Caribbean’s racist beauty standards, which place White people as the standard and an object of desire. Although the Taíno woman is frightened, she is also intrigued by the gaze that she and the Spaniard share. Her mixed feelings reflect the “happiness and fear” of the *Agüeybana*. And thus, the historical colonial violence of the Spanish invasion is overshadowed by the “forbidden” romantic potential between the Taino and Spaniard.

Amarilis’s dreams work to expose the violence of slavery during Puerto Rico’s colonial era, yet they accede to misogynistic and racist narratives. In another dream sequence, the Taíno ancestor referred previously and the Yoruba ancestor (named *Fatú*), are enslaved by the same Spanish family. The Spanish woman defines their relationship when she states that “the native servant is my right hand, and my black slave woman... is hard working” (57). The Spanish woman shows compassion towards *Fatú* when she learns that she is pregnant but does not have a man by her side. The compassion doesn’t last long. When the Spanish woman learns that *Fatú* was raped and impregnated by her own husband, *Fatú*’s baby is taken away at birth. *Fatú*’s pain from losing her child to slavery leads her to murder her master’s wife:

But I have avenged myself. I have drunk her blood. The native girl was afraid when she saw me with the white woman’s heart in my hands, but she also drunk the woman’s blood because she also thirsts for justice. She too has in her womb a child with white blood that one day soon will be a slave too. May the gods be with them always!... And you, you should also drink from this blood. (107)

In this passage, *Fatú* seeks justice for herself, detailing how she grasps the racial hierarchies at play. Although this scene offers a very powerful counternarrative to the “benevolent-slavery”

theory, it is still stereotypical to portray the enslaved woman as the main perpetrator of violence. Unlike the Taíno ancestor, who is portrayed as a docile cliché, Fatú is defined as a “strong woman” early on and thus is the “only” one who can perform such a “savage” act. Furthermore, it is important to note how the violence illustrated in these colonial era dreams only occurs between the women. The Spanish men who conquered and subjugated the land and women escape the justice sought by the Yoruba and Taíno women.

Amarilis wakes up to the taste of blood after this dream, signaling that the ritual has further bonded her to her ancestors. Our protagonist believes that Fatú’s final words to “drink from this blood” are a warning, a call so that such a violent racist history does not repeat itself. Then, for the first time in the novel, Amarilis determines that her Black features (nose, lips, and hair) will no longer be a “disgrace” to her and affirms that she will no longer “hide it in order to be happy” (108). Amarilis is able to understand that she has been subconsciously straightening her hair to fit into the standards of *mestizaje*. With this newfound confidence, Amarilis is able to acknowledge and truly embrace her trinity of self without having to reject her Blackness.

However, this is not how the novel ends. Amarilis’s second and last affirmation of her curly hair comes through a developing relationship with a man named Peter from the United States. Peter emails her wanting to practice his Spanish. In his email he asks about Amarilis’s physical appearance wanting to confirm whether she is “*morena*” (brown-skinned; sometimes a euphemism for Black) and has “*pelo negro*” (Black hair). Amarilis, still in the mindset to find a partner, confirms that it is so and hopes that she will hear from him again. Does Amarilis’s comfort with Peter asking if she is Black suggest that she views the United States as a racial democracy and therefore Peter’s question is not racist like Omar’s? As she appears to be

codependent on a male gaze, it is challenging to discern Amarilis's ability to affirm her Black self-outside from her desirability.

Although I believe this novel fails to confidently affirm Blackness, it has been instrumental in furthering conversations about race and hair in Puerto Rico. In the year that *Pelo bueno, pelo malo* (2006) was published, it was nominated for the Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Prize and won an Honorary Mention from the Pen Club of Puerto Rico. Award nominations signal acceptance. For a novel that depends on folkloric understanding of Blackness to garner such attention suggests that, at the time, the only way for stories about race and Blackness to be recognized is if they too conceded to colonialist and sexist norms. *Pelo bueno, pelo malo* was one of the few accessible and mainstream texts that acknowledged a Black identity in Puerto Rico. And so, because of *Pelo bueno, pelo malo* Puerto Rican writers were able to develop more affirmative approaches and language to celebrate Black hair.

3. Affirming Black Hair in Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's *Pelo bueno*

Pelo bueno (*Good Hair*) (2018) is a twenty-five-page children's book written in Spanish by Puerto Rican writer Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro and illustrated by Brittany Gordon Pabón that tenderly affirms and defends Black hair through the relationship of a child narrator and her grandmother. Intended for children ages five and up, the book addresses an adult audience in the back cover copy, which emphasizes that the story “highlights the roots of Afro-Puerto Ricans and instills pride in the growth of self-esteem in our grandchildren and granddaughters, sons and daughters.”⁹ The book's literary genealogy can be appreciated in the author's dedication to Puerto Ricans whose contributions highlight the Afro-Puerto Rican experience: Gloriann Sacha Antonetty Lebrón, who in 2019 launched *Revista Étnica*, the first-ever magazine specifically created for Black women in Puerto Rico; as well as Carmen Montañez, author of the novel *Good Hair, Bad Hair* (discussed in the previous section). Arroyo Pizarro recognizes the new possibilities for Afro-Puerto Rican representation that will come from Antonetty Lebrón's platform, honors the cultural work that Montañez has laid out, and claims them both as instrumental to *Pelo bueno*. Most of the book's pages are filled with close-up images of the child narrator and her grandmother, Petronila. The illustrator employs soft lines and a palette of rich browns, greens, and blues, placing the reader directly into the intimate self-affirming teaching moment the grandmother creates. It is clear from the book's paratext that *Pelo bueno* works in tandem with literary works and artistic initiatives that push forward Afro-Puerto Rican discourse.¹⁰

⁹ Translations from Spanish in this essay are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁰ Literary theorist Gérard Genette argued that a text rarely is presented unaccompanied and defines the surrounding text, illustrations, introductions, prefaces, and titles that reinforce the main text as a paratext. We can interpret a paratext as a set practices and discourses that serve as “a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy” (Genette, Gérard, and Maclean 1-2).

The first page of *Pelo bueno* portrays abuela Petronila affectionally brushing her grown grandchild's curly hair. The two brown-skinned kin are outside, smiling, enjoying the sun and each other's company. The narrative then shifts to a flashback of the grandchild asking abuela Petronila why other children in school refer to her hair as "pelo malo." Abuela Petronila defends the beauty of natural hair and styles her granddaughters' in numerous ways, explaining how certain styles such as braids and headwraps are tied to Afro-Puerto Rican history. Through these hair tutorials, the granddaughter learns to take pride not only in her hair, but in her Blackness. In the end, both granddaughter and grandmother are full of smiles as they dance and celebrate their "good hair." Arroyo Pizarro's *Pelo bueno* presents language and imagery that affirms the beauty of Black hair and proposes hopeful alternatives to dealing with Puerto Rico's anti-Blackness.

Arroyo Pizarro employs the innocence of a child's perspective throughout the story to reveal the negative messages about curly, kinky hair in Puerto Rican culture. The child narrator shares with her grandmother that her classmates have called her hair an "afro":

En la escuela, mis amigas le dicen a mi pelo "afro". Yo le pregunté a mi abuela Petronila si me pelo verdadementa era un afro. (8)

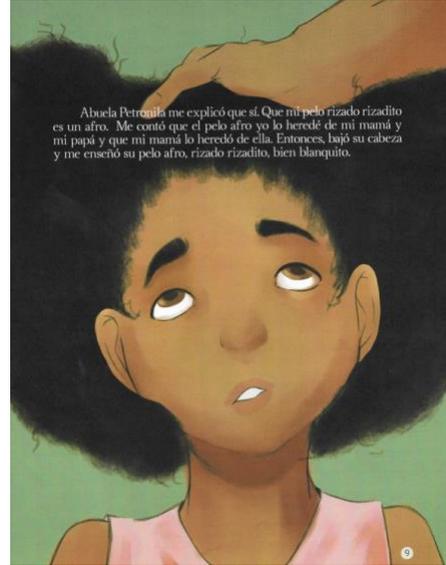
At school, my girlfriends call my hair "afro". I asked my grandmother Petronila if my hair was really an afro.

Abuela Petronila me explicó que sí. Que mi pelo rizado rizado es un afro. Me contó que el pelo afro yo lo heredé de mi mamá y mi papá y que mi mamá lo heredó de ella. Entonces, bajó su cabeza y me enseñó su pelo afro, rizado rizado, bien blanquito. (9)

Abuela Petronila explained to me that yes. That my curly, curly hair is an afro. She told me that I inherited my afro hair from my mom and my dad, and that my mom inherited it from her parents. Then she lowered her head and showed me her afro hair, her curly, curly, softly white hair.

At such a young age, the child narrator is picking up on the language used at school to describe her appearance, particularly her hair, and is able to sense the negativity surrounding these descriptors. As children, we internalize all sorts of messages, positive and negative, that help shape how we define beauty; these messages alter our relationships with ourselves and others.

Although the term “afro” is not inherently anti-Black or racist, it is clear that the children have learned to associate curly and kinky hair with negative connotations. Her classmates’ comments have triggered the need for the child narrator to seek a trusted adult to confirm the validity of these messages. She is sure that her grandmother will be able to tell her the “real” truth. The illustration shows that these racial microaggressions have wounded the child



narrator’s confidence as she worriedly looks as up as abuela Petronila touches her hair, confirming it is, in fact, an afro. When abuela Petronila shares that hair texture is hereditary, this allows the child to be able to see her family reflected in her curls. By utilizing the perspective of a child, Arroyo Pizarro is able to expose how Puerto Rican culture normalizes the shaming of curly, kinky hair and how it disempowers Black Puerto Ricans from an early age.

In her response to her grandchild, abuela Petronila is able to debunk the negative connotations surrounding Black hair and restore her grandchild’s sense of self. She quickly shuts down the labeling of her grandchild’s hair as bad and defends her afro:

Le pregunté a mi abuela Petronila por qué otros niños de la escuela le llaman a mi pelo rizado rizado, pelo malo. No le hagas caso a esos niños. Tu pelo no es malo, tu pelo no es travieso, tu pelo no es desobediente. Tu pelo no se porta mal, no miente, no ofende, no humilla, no se burla. Por eso tu pelo no puede ser malo. Tu pelo no ha hecho nada malo. – me dijo ella. (10)

I asked my grandmother Petronila why other kids at school call my curly, curly hair, bad hair. Don’t listen to those kids. Your hair is not bad, your hair is not mischievous, your hair is not disobedient. Your hair doesn’t behave badly, it doesn’t lie, it doesn’t offend, it doesn’t humiliate others, it doesn’t scoff at anyone. That’s why your hair can’t be bad. Your hair hasn’t done anything wrong, she told me.

The child has recognized the relationship between bad behavior and bad moral character, so when badness becomes associated with a part of her body, she begins to worry it makes her a bad

person. Abuela Petronila rejects the term “bad hair” and leads her grandchild through a series of verbs that describe actual bad behavior such as lying, offending, and taunting, assuring the child that her hair cannot be classified as bad because it has not done anything bad. On this point, Arroyo Pizarro echoes the important Puerto Rican playwright Luis Rafael Sánchez, who wrote, in a well-known essay entitled “Pelo malo” (1995),

“racists impose morality or pathology onto hair... There is no single reason to place principles of morality on curly or nappy hair unless you support the idea that black people lack goodness in nature or future. There is also no reason to place principles of health on curly or nappy hair, unless the racial prejudice implies that curly hair or nappy hair are innately sick... bad hair is the one that falls out. Therefore, only bald people have bad hair”. (119)

Whereas Rafael Sánchez chooses humor as a strategy to convey how absurd the connection between morality and Black hair is, Arroyo Pizarro uses this scenario of teaching instead.

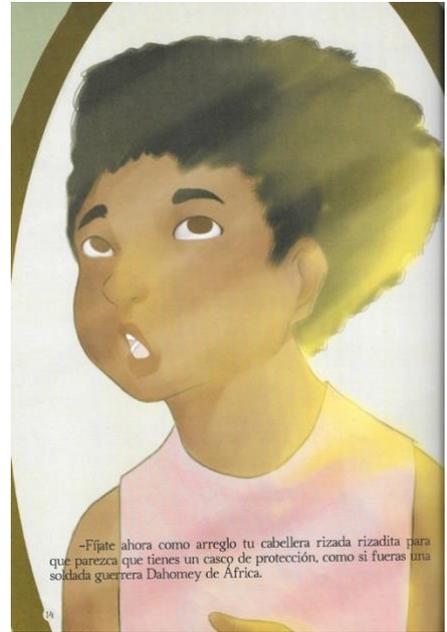
Abuela Petronila not only defends the child’s curls, she also playfully demonstrates new ways of styling and caring for them through a game of dress up that preserves the memories of and promotes pride in Afro-Puerto Rican heritage. She explains how their own family’s history is a part of a tradition of taking care of one’s natural hair:

Ahora a este hermoso pelo rizado rizado
mira cómo puedo hacerle unas trenzas.
Recuerda que las trenzas para nuestras
abuelas eran muy importantes. Con las
trenzas se dibujaban mapas de escape
cuando nuestras ancestras eran esclavizadas
(12).

Now look how I can make some braids with
this beautiful, curly, curly hair. Remember
that for our grandmothers, braids were very
important. Our ancestors were able to draw
escape maps with braids when they were
enslaved.

Throughout the story, abuela Petronila affectionately calls her grandchild’s afro “pelo rizado rizado.” In Spanish, the suffix -ito added to the end of a word is a diminutive indicating small size, affection, or both. The repetition in “rizado rizado” emphasizes both how curly *and* how endearing the child’s hair is—a message that is lost in the English translation “curly, curly hair.”

In this specific passage, Petronila also calls it “beautiful.” In this way, abuela Petronila introduces positive vocabulary to help reframe her granddaughter’s experience as an Afro-Puerto Rican. In this excerpt, the child is learning that for her ancestors, natural hair was intimately tied to freedom. Arroyo Pizarro utilizes the phrase “cuando nuestras ancestas eran esclavizadas” (when our ancestors were enslaved) rather than “when our ancestors were slaves” in an attempt to reclaim their personal and historical



humanity. The grandmother goes on to style her grandchild’s hair into a crown, saying that she now is “a queen like the queens from our African ancestors” (13).

Then she styles the hair like a helmet, “as if you were a Dahomey soldier from Africa”(14).¹¹

The grandmother continues to praise the beauty of her grandchild’s hair, “See how we can place a turban on your beautiful head of hair, and you look as radiant as the black woman Juana Agripina of Ponce?” (16). By mentioning Juana Agripina, an enslaved woman who legally defended and fought for her freedom in nineteenth-century Puerto Rico, the grandmother honors the beauty and history of resistance of Afro-Puerto Ricans. These new styles allow the grandchild not only to see her natural hair in a new light, but also to be introduced to a more varied representation of history that includes images of the strength and beauty of African queens and women warriors. The corresponding illustration shows the child smiling and looking amazed at herself in the mirror as her grandmother makes tangible these fashions of cultural expression. This sequence of dress-up allows abuela Petronila to playfully and pragmatically introduce their history in a way that will allow the child to reflect and associate her hair with joy and resiliency.

¹¹ Dahomey, now southern Benin, was a precolonial 17th-19th century African kingdom known for its women warriors and for being home to West Africa’s largest enslavement port (Helicon 2018).

The child narrator expresses her gratitude towards her grandmother by asking if she can practice on her afro, exemplifying the power of hair styling as a tradition of nurturing healing relationships among Black women. Abuela Petronila figuratively and literally gives her grandchild the tools she needs in order to practice these cultural expressions of hair dressing:

Yo muerta de la risa, bailo alrededor de la habitación. Soy feliz, muy feliz de que la abuela me haya peinado. (18)
–¿Puedo peinar tu hermoso afro blanco? – le pregunto a la abuela Petronila.

Dying with laughter, I dance around the room. I am happy, very happy that my grandmother has styled my hair.
–Can I comb your beautiful white afro? – I ask grandma Petronila.

Abuela Petronila me entrega la peinilla y la peineta.
–Claro que sí. (19)

Grandma Petronila hands me the comb and the decorative comb.
–Yes, of course.

The grandchild is then seen lovingly and amateurishly styling her grandmother’s afro into buns, braids, a crown, with a headwrap, and twists, just like she was taught. Here, the granddaughter is not only practicing the styles on abuela Petronila but also utilizing the language that she taught her as well, calling her white afro beautiful. The grandmother is seen smiling ear to ear in the following seven pages, taking in the goodness of her granddaughter who wants to return the caring and loving gesture. The story ends with this beautiful moment:

Abuela Petronila y yo, mostrando los caracolitos, nos vamos felices a jugar al patio, a bailar y a celebrar nuestro pelo bueno, tan y tan y tan y tan y tan bueno (25).

Showing our ringlets, Grandma Petronila and I happily go to play in the yard, to dance and to celebrate our hair that is so good – so, and so, and so, and so, so good.

The child’s confidence and pride in her natural hair has grown exponentially. Arroyo Pizarro emphasizes her joy and need to celebrate her hair by repeating the word “*tan*” (so) five times to emphasize the “goodness” of her natural hair. By having abuela Petronila vindicate curly, kinky hair, Arroyo Pizarro highlights the importance of exposing children to accurate and edifying frameworks for understanding their Blackness early on to combat the anti-Black messages that are ingrained in Puerto Rican culture. The grandmother has taken time to free her grandchild

from the fear of having “bad hair,” educating her on all the ways her hair is beautiful, powerful, historical, and good. Thus, *Pelo Bueno* serves as a much-needed model for grandparents and parents who want to take the time to nurture this same pride in their children.

4. Affirming Black Identities, Bodies, and Histories in Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's Forthcoming Poetry Collection *Afrofeministamente*

Although Black feminism has informed the praxis of Afrofeminism, it often fails to acknowledge the experiences of Black women from different continents, cultures, and languages and imposes the experiences of African American women as the dominant discourse.

Afrofeminism challenges and expands the global legacy of Black feminism and “insists on grounding analysis and action in the particular and specific histories of colonialism, racial formation and gender hierarchy of the various European nation-states in which Black women live” (Emejulu and Sobande). In January of 2020, Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro set out to create a series of poems under the title *Afrofeministamente* in hopes to contribute to the growing literary tradition of afrofeminist texts geared towards younger audiences and allies. In the blog *Afroféminas* (<https://afrofeminas.com/>), Arroyo Pizarro shares that while the book was set to release in April or May of this year, she has decided to release three poems amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic to “keep everyone company during this process of closure, isolation and quarantine”.¹² She states that texts from afrofeminists writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Shirley Campbell and Roxane Gay have inspired her to put forward *Afrofeministamente*. Arroyo Pizarro signs off her introduction to the poems with “we continue afroresisting. Your Afro-Puerto Rican, Yolanda”. This paratext serves as an intimate letter from writer to reader that further personalizes the reading experience. The poems that she has published and which I discuss here are titled “Tratado de auto-afroreparación” (“Afroself-reparation Treaty/se”) published on March 18th; “Credo del pelo afro” (“Afro Hair Creed”), published on March 22nd; and “Afrofeministamente” (“Afrofeministly”) on March 31st.¹³

¹² *Afroféminas* is the first online magazine in Spain created by three Black women who have dedicated this space to highlighting the works of afro descendant women in Spanish speaking and Latin American cultures.

¹³ Title and poetry translations in this essay courtesy of Dr. Alba F. Aragón.

The full title of the poetry collection is *Afrofeministamente: «un Tratado de afroamor propio para niñas y jovencitas, niños y jovencitos, niñes todes. Una herramienta de afrodescubrimiento, afroautoestima y afroempoderamiento para adolescentes y tode adultx que necesite estos versos de AfroResistencia.»*. Roughly, the title translates to: “Afrofeministly: a treatise on afroself-love for little girls and young girls, little boys and young boys, children of all genders. A tool for afroself-discovery, afroself-esteem, and afroempowerment for teenagers and adults of all genders who might need these verses of AfroResistance,” With this title, Arroyo Pizarro is creating language that not only centers but places “afro” in front of everything. This collection intends to qualify love, discovery, self-esteem, empowerment, and resistance as not simply rooted in the state of being or being identified as “Black” but in the affirmation of and relation to a larger Black heritage, tradition, and history. Notice the lack of hyphenation in these words that she’s created; it is a testament to the fact that there cannot be a division of the “afro” from the praxis of love and resistance.

Gender is a prominent grammatical feature in the Spanish language. To resist that, Arroyo Pizarro engages with gender neutral and inclusive languages with the letter substitutions of -e and -x where a male-marking -o or a female-marking -a would normally be placed. In this way, Arroyo Pizarro makes clear that this collection is including everyone, especially children and teens, who are the most impacted by harmful language surrounding race, gender, and sexuality as they look to the adults around them to make sense of their experiences. By creating her own language in which she combats these negative discourses, Arroyo Pizarro engages in what she calls “*AfroResistencia*” (“AfroResistance”), educating the newer generation through positive representations of themselves. The title unapologetically occupies a large area on paper and in a reader’s breath, figuratively and literally demanding space and visibility for Blackness.

This title also suggest that *Afrofeministamente* is more than just a collection of poems, but a tangible set of tools that Black readers can refer to when on a journey of or in need of self-love, discovery, pride, and empowerment. The neologism “Afrofeministamente” can be roughly translated as “Afrofeministly” (that is, “in an Afrofeminist way”). Arroyo Pizarro wants readers to engage with these poems and not just passively consume them but to see themselves reflected and be moved to share these practices within their communities. In this way, *Afrofeministamente* is an active, vibrant, and evolving philosophy based on the needs of Black people.

In the collection’s title poem “Afrofeministamente,” Arroyo Pizarro centers her experience as a Black woman in Latin America to explore the ways in which Black womxn can proudly reclaim language and space. In the opening lines the poetic speaker introduces herself and subsequently her audience using terms that convey pride in herself:

Soy una afrofémina puertorriqueña
una afroboricua guillá y con babilla
una AfroDiva de tres pares de ovarios. (1–3)

I am a Puerto Rican afrowoman
a gutsy and self-assured afroboricua
an AfroDiva with three pairs of ovaries.

Rather than using familiar terms to describe herself as a Black Puerto Rican woman, she uses “afrofémina puertorriqueña” and “afroboricua.” She qualifies that identity using imaginative slang such as *guillá* (having self-pride) and *babilla* (courage) to root herself in a language for and by the people that links her to a distinct Puerto Rican experience that historically been associated with Blackness. With every introduction, the term afro precedes all descriptors, emphasizing the author’s pride in her Blackness. In the third line she denotes that she is an “AfroDiva with three pairs of ovaries,” mocking the masculinist bravado of having big *cojones* (testicles) to embrace her feminine bravery. Seemingly addressing those who feel antagonized by political correctness, Arroyo Pizarro proudly claims a political correctness centered in Blackness. For Arroyo Pizarro,

Afrofeministamente is an affirmation and moral obligation for the Black womxn in her life both past and present:

Soy lo afrofeministamente correcto
decido por mí
por las mujeres que hoy me acompañan
por las Negras poderosas que me visitan
se me aparecen en sueños
me dictan sus leyendas encomiables
pueblan mi ejército de poetas (24-29)

I am what is afrofeministly correct
I decide for me
for the women that accompany me today
for the powerful Black women who visit me
who appear in my dreams
who dictate their praiseworthy legends to me
populating my army of poets

Soy lo afrofeministamente correcto
y estas son mis AfroAmoras.(38-39)

I am what is afrofeministly correct
and these women are my AfroLoves.

Arroyo Pizarro evokes her ancestors as those who have shown her how to live in a way that is “afrofeministly correct.” She employs the phrase “afrofeministamente correcto” as a play on words for “politically correct,” in an attempt to restore a term that has been burned out by those annoyed with the idea of recognizing an Afro-Latin America. In this way, she rejects the claims that political correctness is some new liberal fad, corroborating the existence of a society that still denies its Blackness. She names midwives, educators, breast feeders, and friends as examples of people who make it possible for this philosophy to thrive. Arroyo Pizarro claims all of these ways of being as “afrofeministly” correct and evidence of a legacy of a loving Black tradition.

By modifying Afrofeminism to be the adverb afrofeministically, Arroyo Pizarro declares a new philosophy that attempts to expound how racial justice and equity will be sought. In the second stanza Arroyo Pizarro articulates a series of demands:

exijo igualdad racial para mí y mis hermanes
exijo que se reconozcan mis experiencias
y las de mi pueblo
las de mi genealogía milenaria
que sean colocadas
en nuestros libros de historia

I demand racial equality for me and my
siblings of all genders
I demand that my experiences be recognized
as well as my people’s
and those of my millenary genealogy
for them to be placed
in our history books

nuestros libros de texto
en nuestra ficción, narrativa y poética (4-
13).

in our textbooks
in our fiction, narrative, and poetry.

As an Afro-Puerto Rican, Arroyo Pizarro is making clear that these demands for her experience as well as those of her African ancestors to be acknowledged are nonnegotiable. Again, she utilizes gender inclusive language with “hermanes” – as opposed to the traditionally gendered nouns hermanos (brothers) and hermanas (sisters) – to stress how her vision of racial justice is not one based in colonial binaries of gender and sexual identities and expressions. Arroyo Pizarro also notes how Black history and experiences are relegated to history books and demands that it be represented in a more present state:

mis rostros y colores deben aparecer en las
portadas
en los anuncios
en las academias
las ceremonias
los murales
en las calles y avenidas
y hasta en el espacio sideral (15-21).

my faces and colors must appear
on the covers
in the advertisements
in the academies
the ceremonies
the murals
in streets and avenues
and even in outer space.

Arroyo Pizarro envisions a world in which Blackness is front and center and beautifully in your face. In a world in which representations of Blackness are seen even in outer space, there can be no denial of its presence and even omnipresence. In specifying that her Blackness should flow freely from academia to the streets, Arroyo Pizarro makes clear that celebrations of Blackness must also come with the recognition of a multi-faceted, multi-modal, and even multi-planetary acceptance of Black people. From that perspective, we can see that Arroyo Pizarro is communicating her own exploration and validation of the historical and societal Black experiences.

In her poem “Tratado de auto-afrorreparación” (“Afroself-reparation Treaty/se”), Arroyo Pizarro promotes a self-healing process for afro-descendants that challenges the expectations

associated with the idea of reparations. The title invokes both definitions of “tratado” in Spanish: the first being a treaty and the other a treatise or explanation of a theory. As a treaty, this poem calls for the acknowledgment and implementation of both political and community-based reparations for Black people. The poem recognizes the conflict between the people and institutions that enslaved humans and the African peoples who were enslaved, which would justify the need for reparations. However, Arroyo Pizarro challenges discourses around reparations and argues for Black people to prioritize their own self-healing:

Sanaré la herida
y no permitiré que nunca
nunca, nunca más alguien me hiera

I will heal the wound
And will never,
ever, ever again allow anyone to hurt me

Afrorepararé
afroreparárate
afroreparemos nuestra familia
afroreparemos la escuela
afroreparemos la comunidad
afroreparémonos todos
afroreparación ahora. (23-32)

I will afrorepair
Afrorepair yourself
Let’s afrorepair our family
Let’s afrorepair our schools
Let’s afrorepair our community
Let’s afrorepair ourselves, all of us
Afroreparation now.

Here, the speaker proclaims that Black people can facilitate their own process of healing from the trauma of racial injustice and vows never again to allow someone to open such wounds. The phrase “sanaré la herida” (“I will heal the wound”) is repeated in five of the six stanzas of this poem, emphasizing the belief of self-care. The poem concludes with Arroyo Pizarro presenting new modes of self-care that include healing of the family, schools, and community, stressing the urgency of starting a collective Black healing now.

As an explanation of a theory, the poem “Tratado de auto-afroreparación” (“Afroself-reparation Treaty/se”) also works as a guide for afro-descendants to look inwards to care for the wounds caused by their oppressors. Although Arroyo Pizarro’s intended audience does not center her oppressors, the poetic voice details the harm that their actions and ideologies cause.

The poem does not absolve the need for those who benefited from slavery to make amends, as it names the ways that its injustice still lives in society:

Sanaré la herida racista causada
por todo aquel que me ha dicho fea
por mi color de piel
de quienes han empleado la frase hiriente
“mejorar la raza”
de aquellos que se han atrevido a llamar a
mi afro como “Pelo malo” (1-5).

I will heal the racist wound caused
by each person who has called me ugly
because of my skin color
by those who have used the hurtful phrase
“to better the race”
for those who have dared to refer to my afro
as “bad hair.”

The poetic speaker states that they will heal the racist wounds caused by those who have hurtfully made racist remarks about their skin color and hair. Violence towards afro descendants has been normalized in unchecked language and ideologies that promote the silencing, discrimination, and rejection of Blackness in Latin American and Caribbean societies. Here, the narrator calls out racist sayings that are so ingrained and commonplace such as “mejorar la raza” (“to better the race”) and “pelo malo” (“bad hair”). These sayings reflect the ways people of Latin American descent are encouraged to highlight their proximity to Whiteness, protect *mestizaje*, and ignore the myriad of other ethnicities, races, and gender identities in hopes to eliminate the presence of Blackness or “otherness” in society. This poem rejects these standards as the poetic speaker chooses to celebrate her “chata nariz” (“flat nose”) (13) and her “boca grande” (“big lips”) (18) by telling them they are worthy of respect and affection. As such, Arroyo Pizarro suggests that an integral part of reparations is creating spaces that celebrate and honor the beauty of Blackness for and within themselves.

Arroyo Pizarro’s poem “Credo del pelo afro” (“Afro Hair Creed”) appropriates the Catholic prayer “The Apostle’s Creed” to praise and affirm Blackness. Arroyo Pizarro sanctifies the afro and praises the beauty and power of natural hair:

Creo en mi pelo afro todopoderoso
creador de los risos de este mundo

cabellos crespos visibles e invisibles
creo en la maranta encaracolada (1-4).

I believe in my afro hair, almighty
creator of the curls of this world

of visible and invisible curly manes
I believe in the prayer plant full of ringlets.

A creed is a statement of belief, and in the first lines the author makes clear her stance that Black hair is all powerful. Arroyo Pizarro has placed afro hair in the place of God, elevating both the hair itself and the Black people it grows from. The poem itself is a spiritual experience: readers are intimately participating in the reciting of this prayer that gives power and validity to a part of the Black body that has been damned as bad, making it worthy of praise instead. Many Catholic enslavers believed that Africans were uncivilized and irreligious to justify the enslavement of Black people and identified people of African descendant not as human, but as property and bodies.¹⁴ The poetic voice celebrates the diverse ways that curls manifest in this world. Arroyo Pizarro invokes the Puerto Rican term “maranta” which compares the appearance of curly hair to the messiness of the prayer plant leaves to reclaim and identify the beauty of hair in its natural, “divine” form. The poetic speaker then shares their hopes in the ending of natural hair’s subjugation:

creo en el dubi que se elimina
creo en la expulsión de los rolos y de la
keratina
creo en la destrucción del alisado (1–7).

I believe in the banishment of the Doobie
hair wrap
I believe in the expulsion of rollers and
keratin
I believe in the destruction of chemical
straightening.

Here the speaker acknowledges the different ways Black people have historically tortured and manipulated their natural hair. In doing so, the author compares the afros’ experience of being relaxed and straightened to the suffering that Jesus Christ experienced. This also signifies a

¹⁴ We learn from Omi and Winant that racial classification is a historical process reinforced by both social structures and meanings and that the “conquest of America” initiated “first in religious terms, but later in scientific and political ones” racial awareness. Thus, the conquest was the first and “perhaps greatest— racial formation project” and “together with African slavery it produced the master category of race” (Omi and Winant 114).

demand for the end of this torture and that those with curly, kinky hair should honor their natural hair.

Arroyo Pizarro equates the natural hair journey to a spiritual rebirth in which one can be forgiven for their past hair “sins.” The Catholic religion was colonially imposed on Black people, here Arroyo Pizarro criticizes a religion that was used to berate and police Black aesthetics. In the last verse, readers are awakened to a new hair religion based in afro-spirituality:

Creo en el Espíritu rebelde del Afro
en la Santa Yemayá de las Zeretas
en la Comunión de las trenzas
el perdón que brinda el Gran Corte
la resurrección del cuero cabelludo
y la vida eterna guardada en las leyendas de
nuestros turbantes.
Amén (17-23).

I believe in the rebellious Spirit of the Afro
in Saint Yemayá of the Curly Tresses
in the Communion of the braids
the forgiveness granted by the Big Chop
the resurrection of the scalp
and the eternal life recorded in our turbans’
legends.
Amen.

The holy spirit is replaced by the rebellious spirit of the afro, while the Lord is replaced by Yemayá, the spiritual mother of all and the most powerful orisha or deity in the Afro-Cuban religion Santería. In this poem, she becomes the deity of all things curly and kinky. In this process, Arroyo Pizarro not only praises natural hair, but she vilifies the colonial narratives surrounding this marginalized spiritual tradition. The speaker also analogizes the sacramental powers of braids as facilitators of higher ancestral powers. In the Yoruba tradition, “devotees of certain Yoruba gods and goddesses were required to keep their hair braided in a specific style... because the hair is the closest things to the heavens, communication from the gods and spirits was thought to pass *through* hair to get to the soul” (Byrd and Tharps 4). Caribbean oral traditions assert that during the slave trade enslaved Africans were able to hide dry foods in their braids and weave escape routes on their heads for survival (Carney 1). Braiding continues to be a very intimate transgenerational tradition in which Black people develop relationships with and care for each other. In this new religion the poetic voice has laid out, those who begin to

“resurrect” their scalps are forgiven and born again. Arroyo Pizarro pens a prayer that demands space for a celebratory denomination of natural hair.

A world with *Afrofeministamente: «un Tratado de afroamor propio para niñas y jovencitas, niños y jovencitos, niñas todes. Una herramienta de afrodescubrimiento, afroautoestima y afroempoderamiento para adolescentes y tode adultx que necesite estos versos de AfroResistencia.»* excites me. Arroyo Pizarro’s works transform our understanding of Blackness and the capacities at which it can be loved, affirmed, and celebrated in Puerto Rico. They reject *mestizaje* and demand an unambiguous claiming of Blackness. The affirmative language she creates counters the hurtful and racist rhetoric that has become so commonplace in the Hispanophone Caribbean. Through *Afrofeministamente*, Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro offer us radical and unapologetic affirmations of Blackness in Puerto Rico that challenge the politics of Black hair.

5. Conclusion

I believe that Black people should be able to choose freely how to style and wear their hair, whether naturally or not. However, we must recognize and renounce the racist rhetoric that empowers a culture in which Black people feel pressured to “tame” and “conquer” our hair, and, by extension, our Blackness. Particularly in Puerto Rico where hair continues to be a marker of race, affirming Blackness begins with wearing our hair naturally and learning to celebrate the complexities of our Black identities, bodies, and histories in the face of constant erasure, rejection, and systematic oppression. To do so is a courageous act of love.

In chapter one, I recognize that Montañez’s novel *Good Hair, Bad Hair* has transformed the lives of many Puerto Ricans’ understanding of race and remains an emblematic folkloric text. While Carmen L. Montañez’s novel is able to bravely name anti-Blackness in Puerto Rico, its embrace of *mestizaje* reflects the dire need for more literary affirmations of Blackness. Amarilis, like many Black Puerto Ricans, was not raised in an environment where she was affirmed that her natural hair and Blackness was beautiful. Therefore, her decision to straighten her hair is not just a personal preference but a mechanism used to conceal one of her main identifiers of her African ancestry— her *griferia*.

In chapter two, I promote that Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro’s children’s book *Pelo bueno* reminds us of the importance of cultivating spaces and moments that teach our little ones how to love their Black selves. So many of us have been in the position of the child narrator, when our hair is labeled “pelo malo” for the first time and we don’t know what to make of it other than internalizing that there is something “wrong” with us. Affirmations of our hair and our Blackness become armor that combat the anti-Blackness so deep rooted in our language. It is a beautiful thought to know that this generation of Black children will be raised to take pride in their natural

hair, not to know the pains of relaxers and hot iron plates, and instead be confident in themselves.

Lastly, in chapter three I praise the three poems Arroyo Pizarro's released from her forthcoming poetry collection *Afrofeministamente* for creating new language that challenges our understanding of affirming Blackness and for demanding more. Released at a time in which the world is practicing social distancing, Arroyo Pizarro *Afrofeministamente* makes space to hold and embrace Blackness as remedy. As Black people of the Hispanophone Caribbean, we are constantly and painfully negotiating and rejecting assumptions about our identities. These literary affirmations of Blackness help to further assert that Puerto Rican identity will not become divided or disrupted by such affirmations but will in fact be strengthened by them. *Afrofeministamente* pushes us to practice loving of Blackness regardless of the colonial discourses that tells us to do differently.

Black affirmations allow us to liberate ourselves from racist pressures and domination that tell us our hair is not beautiful, that we are not beautiful. I also cannot ignore the ways in which I personally have benefited from colorism and my looser curl pattern. As mainstream interpretations of the natural hair movement continue to center lighter skin and looser curls textures and erase the unambiguously Black womxn who created this decolonial space, the necessity for affirmations of kinky textures are even more evident. I offer this thesis as my contribution in creating a world in which tighter, kinkier curls and dark skin are affirmed with greater intensity and tenacity. Loving our Blackness is necessary for our liberation, and as bell hooks has shared, these affirmations become spaces of "reconciliation and forgiveness where we let go of past hurt, fear, and shame" (hooks 9) in which we can unapologetically embrace and celebrate each other.

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