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Nicholas R. Jones

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Sor Juana's Black Atlantic: Colonial Blackness and the Poetic Subversions of *Habla de negros*

Nicholas R. Jones
Bucknell University

Todos los sorjuanistas discrepan en algo. Discrepan entre ellos. Discrepan / en algo que suele ser casi todo. Por ejemplo: / Las razones de Sor Juana para tomar los hábitos. Las razones de Sor Juana para escribir la *Carta Atenagórica.* Las razones de Sor Juana para su abjuración final. . . . Y también en casi todo lo demás, de lo cual es posible deducir / que la tarea primordial de los sorjuanistas / es la de discrepar de lo que dicen otros sorjuanistas. (Fabre, qtd. in Kirk 10)[1]

ABSTRACT In this essay, I devise the term *Hispanic Black Atlantic* as a critical tool and discursive geographical space to rethink and revisit Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic model. I envision Sor Juana's colonial Mexican milieu as an integral part of the African diaspora and the Black Atlantic paradigm forged by Gilroy. To move the literary criticism of Sor Juana's

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1. I am grateful for Stephanie Kirk's use of Luis Felipe Fabre's quote—as well as the numerous insights she offers in her book—because it has helped me negotiate the complexities of my interpretation of Sor Juana's poetic representation of Blackness.

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poetic corpus toward a new conversation about colonial Spanish American literature and the multilingual world it reflects, I use Sor Juana's *villancicos* to trace her avowal of Blackness—in its ideological and racial dimensions—as a critical category that travels across space and time while simultaneously turning on their collective head altogether assumptions and claims about Blackness.

Seventeenth-century Mexico City was a turbulent cosmopolitan center. Urban seat of the Spanish Crown's viceregal power, the city of Mexico emerged from the remnants of the Mexicas' destroyed capital, Tenochtitlán. Beginning with its reconstruction in the sixteenth century, the Viceroyalty of New Spain housed a diverse population of impoverished Spaniards, conquered but differentiated Indians, enslaved Africans—*ladinos*, or individuals who were linguistically conversant in Castilian, and *bozales*, individuals directly from Guinea, or Africa, who were unable to speak Castilian—and the new hybrid populations: *mestizos*, *mulatos*, and *zambos*, persons of both Indian and African heritage (Bennett, *Colonial Blackness* 23). It is in this tumultuous cosmopolitan center where we encounter the life and literary works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648?–1695), the most celebrated female writer and intellectual of the Hispanic Baroque.

This essay focuses on Sor Juana's *villancicos*, often characterized in the following three ways: (1) by their musical character; (2) by their popular origin and appropriation in part by learned poets; and (3) by their restriction to religious settings. One of the most popular musico-poetic genres in Spain and the New World during the early modern period, *villancicos* drew heavily on popular poetic imagery and languages, which in turn were reflected by the dancelike quality of their musical settings. Their formal structure consisted of a refrain (*estribillo*) and an indefinite number of stanzas in octosyllables and assonant rhyme. Primarily written in cycles of eight or nine compositions, Sor Juana's *villancicos* were commissioned for use in the cathedrals of Mexico City, Oaxaca, and Puebla. In these spaces, they were performed during the liturgical services of matins. Matins were divided into three liturgical units known as nocturnes. Each of these nocturnes included three lessons (readings from the Bible or from the writings of the fathers of the church).

This study concerns itself with the *villancicos* of a mature Sor Juana dating from 1676 to 1691. During this fifteen-year span of time, she composed *villancicos* in what was known as *habla de negros*. Below I list Sor Juana's corpus

of *habla de negros* poetry, whose lyrics were prepared for the Catholic feasts of the Nativity, the Assumption, the Immaculate Conception, and Saint Catherine of Alexandria:

1. *Villancico* 224 (1676): A la alamación festiva (Jura, Negrillos y Tocotín)
   Composer: Joseph de Agurto y Loaysa; Feast Day: Assumption; Place of Performance: Iglesia Metropolitana de México.
2. *Villancico* 232 (1676): Acá tamo tolo (Negro)
   Composer: Joseph de Agurto y Loaysa; Feast Day: Immaculate Conception; Place of Performance: Iglesia Metropolitana de México.
3. *Villancico* 241 (1677): A los plausibles festejos (Negro, Bachiller, Indio)
   Feast Day: San Pedro Nolasco; Place of Performance: Orden de Nuestra Señora de la Merced.
4. *Villancico* 258 (1679): Por celebrar tanta fiesta (Sacristán, Negras, Seises)
   Composer: Joseph de Agurto y Loaysa; Feast Day: Assumption; Place of Performance: Iglesia Metropolitana de México.
5. *Villancico* 274 (1685): Yo perdí el papel, señores (Latín, Negro y Vascuence)
   Composer: Joseph de Agurto y Loaysa; Feast Day: Assumption; Place of Performance: Iglesia Metropolitana de México.
6. *Villancico* 299 (1690): Los que música no entiende (Jácara, Juguete, Indio y Negro).
   Feast Day: San José; Place of Performance: Catedral de Puebla.

Four additional *villancicos* in *habla de negros* have also been attributed to Sor Juana:

7. *Villancico* ix (1677): Por festejar a la Virgen (Canario, Negra y Víctor)
   Composer: Joseph de Agurto y Loaysa; Feast Day: Assumption; Place of Performance: Iglesia Metropolitana de México.
8. *Villancico* xvi (1678): ¿Ah, Siñol Andlea? (Negrillo)
   Feast Day: Christmas; Place of Performance: Catedral de Puebla.
9. *Villancico* xxxi (1680): Alegres a competencia (Negro)
   Composer: Antonio de Salazar; Feast Day: Christmas; Place of Performance: Catedral de Puebla.
10. *Villancico* lviii (1686): Con sonajas en los pies (Payos y Negros)
    Composer: Joseph de Agurto y Loaysa; Feast Day: Assumption; Place of Performance: Iglesia Metropolitana de México.

Scholarly readings of *habla de negros* provided by Hispanists and linguists since the 1960s have traditionally emphasized the burlesque, comical, and picturesque aspects of the speech form. Spanish philologist Frida Weber de Kurlat, for example, describes *habla de negros* according to its "posibilidades estéticas y dramáticas puramente cómico-burlescas" (139). The canonical reading of Sor Juana's *villancicos* in Africanized Spanish has been established by Baltasar Fra-Molinero in his essay "Los villancicos negros de sor Juana Inés de la Cruz" and Alan Trueblood in his book *A Sor Juana Anthology*. Fra-Molinero divides the poet's *villancicos* according to their social conditions and social protest that affect black African life in New Spain, and their artistic model of the black buffoon [*el negro gracioso*] commonly found in early modern Spanish plays.[2] Following Fra-Molinero's analysis, Trueblood also treats Sor Juana's representation of *habla de negros* as a linguistic phenomenon that "aris[es] from the spoofing of recognizable social types of the day and the reproduction of [black dialect] or jargon" (19). A more recent third study, Mario A. Ortiz's "Villancicos de *negrilla*," insists that Sor Juana's *villancicos* represent superficially perceived stereotypes about blacks that ultimately situate their Blackness within the hegemonic discourse of colonial exoticism. But, as this essay's opening epigraph conveys, all sorjuanistas disagree. For most readers, their assumption is that Sor Juana's poetic representation of *habla de negros* is an inaccurately "racist" portrayal of Blackness. But while each critic offers astute readings of Sor Juana's poetic treatment of blacks and her use of *habla de negros*, I contend that a critical race studies analysis makes an even richer and more complex approach possible for studying the poet's representation of *habla de negros*. Two questions to ponder: why *not* assume Sor Juana is being sincere? Why can she *not* align herself with black African slaves?

Because black Africans figure prominently in the sociocultural fabric and ethnoracial constitution of seventeenth-century Mexican society, my

2. I use "black," with a lower-case "b" to speak of people and color: as in *black* Africans or *black* slaves. "Black" with an upper case "B," instead, refers to concepts, ideology, and culture. In a more taxonomical sense, I also use "black" as an umbrella term that includes and refers to the racial hierarchies and identities of people. In addition to Iberian names and African ethnonyms, sub-Saharan Africans and their descendants are frequently described in early modern Iberia as either *negro* or *negra* ("black"), *moreno* or *morena* ("brown" and also sometimes "black" too), and *mulata* or *mulata* ("mulatto," which in the Caribbean usually meant a lighter-skinned person of mixed African and Iberian ancestry).

research offers a contrasting analysis of *habla de negros* in Sor Juana's *villancico* corpus that highlights its subversive power. As the first writer to showcase *habla de negros* in seventeenth-century New Spain, Sor Juana employs the image of black African slaves to highlight the following themes: (1) their dignity as black Christians, (2) the social conditions of their daily lives, and (3) the paradoxical meaning of their dark skin. As noted by Nina Scott, "Sor Juana, in spite of living in perpetual enclosure, remembered the polyglot accents of the streets of the capital: the speech of the black street vendors, the soft sounds of indigenous Nahuatl, voices of Portuguese immigrants, even the fractured Latin of poorly educated clerics and students" (55). In dialogue with Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic model, I frame Sor Juana's *habla de negros* in the cultural and literary history of the age of the slave trade and Iberian empire building. This stylized language traveled aboard ships with African slaves from the Old World to the New. Sor Juana's black Africans, I argue, speak with a Du Boisian "double-consciousness"—a term that conveys the special difficulties arising from black internalization of an American identity—that empowers them to position and see themselves from within their own cultural worldview as well as from the perspective of the European colonizer and slave society. Sor Juana's literary expression of *habla de negros*—which is arguably linked to the creolized entanglements of culture, linguistics, and race—also embodies "double-consciousness" insofar as she, as a Creole metropolitan subject of New Spain, negotiates her cultural creoleness as a state and condition that reifies multilingualism and multiethnicity. Sor Juana's *habla de negros* is an African linguistic trope rendered visible for those who wish to see it, although it has been transformed and adapted by her New World subject position as colonial, Creole, and woman. In the *villancicos*, I trace the poet's avowal of Blackness—in its ideological and racial dimensions—as a critical category that travels across space and time, while simultaneously turning on its head assumptions and claims about Blackness altogether.

As stipulated in my title, "Sor Juana's Black Atlantic," I envision Sor Juana's colonial Mexican milieu as an integral part of the African diaspora and the Black Atlantic paradigm forged by Gilroy. Simply put, the African diaspora—a set of relations rather than a condition: the complex interplay of African descendants with other ethnic groups in the panorama of social identities—constitutes a field of identities made possible by the complexity of Spanish imperial ideology and Christian political thought, which assigned Africans discrete juridical identities as slaves, royal subjects, and persons with

souls (Bennett, *Africans* 5). Performance Studies critic and scholar of Afro-Mexican Studies Anita Gonzalez reminds us that "[c]oncepts about blackness are developed within the subject 'blacks' and also constructed by others in response to the presence of Africans and African descendants" (20). Echoing Gonzalez's argument, I situate Sor Juana as a so-called "other" responding to "the presence of Africans" in colonial Mexico. *Habla de negros* as it emerges in Sor Juana's *villancicos* is a linguistic embodiment of Blackness not only in seventeenth-century Mexico, but also in the African diaspora at large. It underscores the possibilities of personhood found in black Africans, articulated through the poet's allegorical exegesis of the Song of Songs' well-known message "*nigra sum, sed Formosa*" [I am black and/but lovely] (*Bible*, Song of Songs 1: 5). Alonso de Sandoval in Book 2, chapter 6 "Our Lord God values the blacks and this ministry," from his *De instauranda Aethiopum salute* (Seville, 1627) uses biblical references—specifically in relation to the Song of Songs passage—to argue that black *and* (the) beautiful connect and do not need the conjunction "but":

> This stone, although black, was lustrous and strong. Among the three kinds that adored Jesus Christ, one was black. God revealed his high opinion of Ethiopians [black Africans] when he chose Simon, a black prophet, to take part in the founding of his Church, as written in Acts 13: 1. God does not look down on any color, because what is important to him is that souls find spiritual good. (79)

Sandoval predates Sor Juana, but I do not doubt she studied his *De instauranda* and the intellectual work of the Jesuits in the colonial Spanish Americas.

In the context of black subjectivity, I analyze *Villancicos* 224 and 232 in order to move the literary criticism of Sor Juana's poetic corpus toward a new conversation about colonial Latin American literature and the multilingual world it reflects. With my close readings of these two texts, I seek to complicate scholarly debates among Sor Juana scholars about the significance of the poet's status as a Creole and illegitimate woman who owned a *mulata* slave. The subversive intent I assign to Sor Juana's poetic representation of *habla de negros* aims to disrupt latent and normative assumptions about the experiences of peoples of African descent as powerless, for in her colonial Mexican society the black slave acquired a juridical identity as a vassal and a person with a soul. I ultimately contend that Sor Juana's poetic representations of Blackness and the *habla de negros* negotiate the categories of humanness within the contours of Christianity and slavery.

Afromestizaje, *Colonial Blackness*

The performance history of Sor Juana's *villancicos* furnishes a textual record that illuminates the overlooked African presence in Mexico's transatlantic early modernity and colonial history. On June 6, 2008, the Mexican rap group *Rak Ric Rack!* released their album "Tumba La-Lá-La: Los villancicos negros de Sor Juana." *Rak Ric Rack!*'s celebration of Afro-Mexican culture and heritage, as evidenced by its album honoring both Sor Juana and Mexico's rich African past, promotes the recognition of African contributions to national culture, symbolic of Mexico's 1989 state initiative, the Programa "Nuestra Tercera Raíz." Privileging African ancestry and cultural Blackness as Mexico's "third root," or component of Mexican *mestizaje*, the *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* program was designed to combine efforts to uncover and recount the Afro-Mexican experience and, at the same time, to recognize Afro-Mexican ethnic groups as part of the multiculturalism of the United States of Mexico (Mobwa Mobwa N'djoli). An active continuation and embodiment of the *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* initiative, *Rak Ric Rack!*'s present-day popularization of Sor Juana's Africanized *villancicos* represents what American Studies scholar Marco Cervantes coins as *afromestizaje*. The critic employs this term to reference the identity and cultural production of African-American and Chicana/o subjects in shared spaces and cultural exchanges. "*Afromestizaje*," he explains, "presents an approach to examining fusions between African American and Mexican American cultural expressions in social spaces and employs both concepts of *mestizaje* and the African diaspora" (856). *Afromestizaje* is a viable frame in which to juxtapose *Rak Ric Rack!*'s album to Sor Juana's Africanized *villancicos*, for it illuminates how both Mexican and Mexican-American rap music *and* the musicalized form of *habla de negros* in *villancicos* facilitate a blending of cultural influences.

In their recordings, *Rak Ric Rack!* utilizes African polyrhythmic structures as the basis for their musical production of Sor Juana's *villancicos*. Contrary to common assumptions, the rap group's vocalization of the *habla de negros* speech form is not a burlesque caricature or contrived mockery of black speech. I emphasize this point because I am not convinced that Sor Juana caricaturized or denigrated black speech, either. In fact, as Enrique Anderson Imbert signals, Sor Juana poeticizes in a positive way African-derived culture, language, and musical rhythms, in the spirit of the open curiosity to which the Baroque period lends itself. In fact, the musical group's reproduction of African rhythms reflects Sor Juana's *villancico*'s defining quality as a

potpourri of folkloric dance. The appearance of Africans in the poet's *villancicos* requires the use of dance accompanied by two voices (consisting of either two men, a man and a woman, or two women). The musicologist Robert Stevenson describes African music as a "vivid 6/8 rhythm with constant hemiola shifts in 3/4[, and] F or C Major is the almost universal key [where] a soloist or soloists answered by the chorus govern the texture" ("The Afro-American" 496–97). In Sor Juana's *villancicos* featuring black African protagonists, two African dances are referenced: the *portorrico* or *puerto rico* (from the closing *ensaladilla* of the *villancico* dedicated to St. Peter Nolasco, patron saint of captives and the enslaved) and the *kalenda* (*Villancico* xxvi from the cycle from Puebla for the 1680 Nativity). Also, it must not go unnoticed that the title of *Rak Ric Rack!*'s album—"Tumba La-Lá-La"—is a verse from Sor Juana's *villancico* that mentions the African dance *portorrico*. "In terms of musical modes," explains Martin Munro, "the diverse African peoples brought to the New World the part-playing, polyrhythms, cross-rhythms, time-line, elisions, hockets, ululations, tremolos, vocables, grunts, hums, shouts, and melismatic phrasings from their homelands" (16). Munro's depiction allows us to animate in Sor Juana's *villancicos* the musical landscape and textures of the African diaspora. While for some scholars the presence of African language, dance, and rhythms in Sor Juana's *villancicos* amount to a misreading and perversion of supposed "African" culture and music, I suggest we privilege these as artifacts and sites connected to the African diaspora, and more broadly to Colonial Blackness.

Afromestizaje as a concept responds to Rolena Adorno's call, recently reiterated by Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, for colonial scholars to "study voices that could be simultaneously marginal and central, subaltern and hegemonic" (Martínez-San Miguel, *From Lack to Excess* 31). In Sor Juana's literary corpus, for instance, Colonial Blackness manifests in her ability to create black characters that reflect the lived experiences of Africans in New Spain. Blackness is not abstract for Sor Juana. Rather, it is familiar and tangible: in 1669 she was given a *mulata* slave named Juana de San José by her mother. Juana de San José accompanied Sor Juana during her religious instruction as a nun. She also informed Sor Juana of the daily whereabouts of the Hacienda Panoaya's black slaves and day laborers. In 1684, a year after the release of the poet's play *Los empeños de una casa*, Sor Juana sold her *mulata* slave to her sister Josefa María. As a result, Sor Juana's relationship with her slave reflects the ways in which black Africans in her *villancicos*

assess the world in which they live with a situated knowledge that informs their personhood as black and Catholic.

African Baroque, Baroque Africans

A reading of Sor Juana's *Villancicos* 224 and 232 requires discussion of a key literary antecedent: Luis de Góngora y Argote's *letrilla* "En la fiesta del Santísimo Sacramento" (1609). In "Cosmetic Ontologies, Cosmetic Subversions," I note that "'Santísimo Sacramento' establishes a poetic model and framework for subsequent practitioners of *habla de negros* language who compose *villancicos* to portray black Africans' cultural and linguistic difference, most notably Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz." This article sheds light on the important transatlantic link Sor Juana maintained not only with Góngora, but also with other Spanish literary giants such as Pedro Calderón de la Barca and Francisco de Quevedo. Her work is full of what Frederick Luciani describes as "mimetic gestures" in which she invokes and reinscribes the peninsular greats (Introduction; Chapter 1). I reproduce below an excerpt from Góngora's poem "Santísimo Sacramento" to illustrate Sor Juana's mimetic gestures of the *habla de negros*:

Juana Pongamo fustana, e bailemo alegra; que aunque samo negra, sa hermosa tú. Zambambú, morenica de Congo, zambambú. Zambambú, qué galana me pongo, Zambambú. (lines 11–18)	[Juana Let's put on our fustians and boogy down; For even though we're black, you're beautiful. Zambambú, little black chick from the Congo, Zambambú. Zambambú, I'm getting dolled up real nice, Zambambú.]

"Zambambú, morenica de Congo, / zambambú. / Zambambú, qué galana me pongo, / zambambú" are some of *the* most frequently cited and studied lines in Spanish Golden Age scholarship that deals with blacks. The rhythmic structure and "African"-sounding words capture elements of what might be seen as a version of an early modern *poesía negra* that would later influence Latin America's own forms of *poesía negra* during the *negrista* movement in the 1920s and 1930s. "Zambambú" is not an "African" word, but rather, a fetishization of an Africanized phonetic utterance constructed by European

fantasies of the noises that directly relate to *habla de negros*. In *Villancico* 232, for example, Sor Juana demonstrates her mimetic reinscription of Góngora, as shown in the above-cited passage, by incorporating the "African"-sounding medley "Zambio, lela, lela" to reconfigure African voices in seventeenth-century Mexico. I envision Sor Juana's mimetic reconfiguration of Góngora's rendition of *habla de negros* through the term African Baroque. The concept captures black Africans' need for acquiring personhood, and thus underscores Sor Juana's black protagonists as legitimate interlocutors of Baroque sociocultural aesthetics.

Villancico 224 depicts two African male slaves discussing the significance of the Virgin Mary in their daily lives. In this poem, Sor Juana forges African alter egos that catalyze a critique of the colonial Spanish practice of naming African slaves. The names she assigns the two black protagonists—pronounced in *habla de negros* as Flacico [Francisco] and Pilico [Pirico]—highlight the cultural significance of the African Baroque model I stage in this section. The two names take on the ideological and philosophical attributes of the pre-Socratic philosophers Heraclitus (Pilico) and Democritus (Flacico):

Prosigue la Introducción
Porque dos Negros, al ver
Misterios tan admirables,
Heráclito uno, la llora;
Demócrito otro, la aplaude. (211)

Sor Juana's encoding of Flacico and Pilico as Democritus and Heraclitus must not go unnoticed. In the Baroque system of representation, she devises a code of political morality that, on the one hand, humanizes African slaves, and on the other hand, presents their racial formation as fluid and in tune with a larger phenomenological experience in viceregal New Spain. Throughout the *villancico* Sor Juana employs Spanish Baroque *conceptismos*—witty metaphors and wordplay—to orchestrate a name game that aligns the two black men with the two pre-Socratic philosophers. Her savvy critique of slavery and unjust social hierarchies manifests in the act of inscribing Flacico and Pilico with the traits of Democritus and Heraclitus. I cite Flacico and Pilico's dialogue in its entirety, as they discuss the Assumption of the Virgin Mary:

Negrillos

1. Cantemo, Pilico,
que se va las Reina,
y dalemu turo
una noche buena.
2. Iguale yolale,
Flacico, de pena,
que nos deja ascula
a turo las Negla.
1. Si las Cielo va y Dioso la lleva,
¿pala qué yolá?
si Eya sa cuntenta?
Sará muy galana,
Vitita ri tela,
milando la Sole,
pisando la Streya.
1. Déjame yolá,
Flacico, pol Eya,
que se va, y nosotlo
la Oblaje nos deja.
1. Caya, que sa siempre milando
la Iglesia;
mila las Pañola,
que se quela plieta.
2. Bien dici, Flacico:
tura sa suspensa;
si tú quiele, demo
unas cantaleta
1. ¡Nomble de mi Dioso,
que sa cosa buena!
Aola, Pilico
que nos mila atenta:
Estribillo
—¡Ah, ah, ah
que la Reina se nos va!
—¡Uh, uh, uh
que non blanca como tú,
nin Pañó que no sa buena,

[1. Let's sing, Pirico,
the Queen is leaving.
She's bidding us farewell
on Christmas Eve.
2. Either way I'll cry,
Francisco. Out of pity,
she's leaving us dark
like the rest of blacks.
1. If she's heading off to Heaven and
God carries her away,
then what's the use in crying?
Isn't she happy?
She'll be dressed up nice,
in fact, I see her in fancy clothes,
watching the sun
and walking with the stars.
1. Just let me cry
for her Francisco!
She's going away,
and she's leaving us at the *obraje*.
1. Hush! She's always watching over
the Church.
Look at the Spaniards;
they stayed black too.
2. That's right Francisco:
look how everyone is baffled;
if you want, / let's sing them a song.
1. In the name of God,
that's a good idea!
Now, Pirico,
they're ready for us to sing:
Refrain
—Ah, ah, ah,
the Queen leaves us!
—Uh, uh, uh
she's not white like you,
nor a Spaniard; that's not good enough!

que Ella dici: So molena	She says: I'm a black woman,
con las Sole que mirá!	for the sun shines on me!
—¡Ah, ah, ah,	—Ah, ah, ah,
que la Reina se nos va! (211–12)	the Queen leaves us!]

One theoretical argument grounded by Sor Juana's *Villancico* 224 hinges on Democritus's philosophy on ethics and politics: that equality is noble. In the poem's introduction, Sor Juana inserts the image of Jura—personified as an Allegiance or an Oath—to indicate that people from all rungs of society have a Queen who favors and protects them. Sor Juana does not exclude African slaves, Flacico and Pilico in this context, from this oath. As the text illustrates, Flacico and Pilico debate the significance of the leitmotif of the religious festivities and the Virgin Mary's ascension to Heaven. Flacico and Pilico are, in fact, thinking subjects! As mediated by Sor Juana's poetic craft, the two men's exchange throughout the *villancico* negotiates the category of humanness within the contours of Christianity and slavery. In *Villancico* 224, Flacico and Pilico mobilize their agency as intellectuals and philosophers as they discuss the *villancico*'s complex relationship to orthodox doctrine and its vital part in the liturgy of the Mass for the Assumption of the Virgin Mary.

Pilico assumes a different ideological position from his counterpart Flacico. The polarized themes of laughter and weeping manifest repeatedly in Spanish Baroque poetry on both shores of the Atlantic. In *Culture of the Baroque*, José Antonio Maravall defines the Spanish Baroque's image of the world and human beings as symbolic of the figures of Democritus and Heraclitus: "[t]he theme of the alternating and counterposed result of laughter and crying vis-à-vis the world was symbolized in the figures of Democritus and Heraclitus" (156). Sor Juana aligns Flacico with the cheerful Democritus and Pilico with the weeping Heraclitus. One salient topic that characterizes the philosophical works of Heraclitus of Ephesus is the notion of the obscure. Sor Juana reappropriates Heraclitan philosophy through Pilico's complaint: "Iguale yolale, / Flacico, de pena, / que nos deja ascula / a turo las Negla." Feeling betrayed by the Queen/Virgin Mary figure, Pilico becomes angered that he and Flacico are left "ascula" (*oscuro*). Sor Juana's Baroque *conceptista* treatment of *ascula* not only signals the two characters' dark skin, but more importantly, nods playfully to the *darkness* of one's destiny without a patron's protection. The poet's symbolic troping of Pilico and Flacico acknowledges the social construction of cross-racial relations

between whites (as "superior" guardians) and blacks (as "inferior" dependents). "Caya, que sa siempre / milando la Iglesia," remarks Flacico, "mil las Pañola, / que se quela plieta." Sor Juana's chromatic inversion of white Spaniards as black is powerful, for it destabilizes the power invested in racial, religious, and social hierarchies. The two lines "mila las Pañola, / que se quela plieta" further empower an *ontological* Colonial Blackness that is closely tied to slavery.[3]

The poem's *estribillo* cited above conveys a complex socioreligious matrix. Addressed to the audience of a Peninsular and European-descended Creole elite, the verses "que non blanca como tú, / nin Pañol que no sa buena," suggests that European-descended Spaniards are not necessarily a group of people who the Virgin Mary/Queen figure desires to resemble physically. Embracing black beauty, she prefers somatic Blackness (*morena*) like the Queen of Sheba from the Song of Songs. The ideological and racial disavowal of *what* constitutes "Spanishness" acquires its greatest force as Sor Juana inverts social and racial roles in the *villancico*. Like her Spanish Peninsular interlocutor Góngora in "En la fiesta del Santísimo Sacramento," discussed earlier, Sor Juana constructs an appreciation for black beauty and humanity. Whereas Góngora portrays black female beauty in the *letrilla* "Santísimo Sacramento" (see my "Cosmetic Ontologies"), Sor Juana substitutes Góngora's peninsular representation of the power of black women's beauty with the figure of the Black Madonna.

Historically, the phenomenon of the Black Madonna is a fluid syncretic blend of the Virgin Mary and ancient Mother Goddesses from Eurasian, Native American, and African cultures. Specific to *Villancico* 224, Sor Juana imbues the Virgin Mary with the attributes of the Virgin of Guadalupe: a dark-skinned Mary who coalesces with the "black and/but lovely" woman of the Song of Songs, as expressed in the poet's *auto sacramental*, *El divino Narciso*.[4] The Virgin as *morena* makes Blackness sacred due to her humility.

3. The word *plieta*, or *prieta* operates as a synonym for black (*negro*; *prieto*), which during the time of this *villancico* meant slave.

4. Sor Juana's sonnet 206 explicitly deals with the Virgin of Guadalupe. Further, the Virgin of Guadalupe is one of Spain's three black madonnas. For additional scholarship on black madonnas as migratory figures in the Mexican and transatlantic contexts, see Jeanette Favrot Peterson's *Visualizing Guadalupe*, Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba's *The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe*, and Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum's *Black Madonnas*. On the geography and power of eyesight in early modernity, refer to *Seeing Across the Early Modern World*, co-edited by Dana Leibsohn and Favrot-Peterson. Favrot-Peterson's chapter in this collection, "Seeing Blackness and

Sor Juana foregrounds the Black Madonna so as to implicitly critique patriarchal hegemony and expose its biases, which then illuminates her poetic subversion of the *habla de negros* (as articulated by Flacico and Pilico). The *villancico* closes in standard Castilian:

> Los Mejicanos alegres
> también a su usanza salen,
> que en quien campa la lealtad
> bien es que el aplauso campe;
> y con cláusulas tiernas
> del Mejicano lenguaje,
> en un Tocotín sonoro
> dicen con voces süayes. (212)

Jura foregrounds the Nahuatl voice in the poem's closing remarks with a Nahuatl song, or *tocotín*, asking the Virgin Mary not to forget her indigenous devotees.[5] Positioned as the intermediary between Christ and humankind, the Virgin Mary represents the salvation of faithful Indians. While Sor Juana boldly reclaims and reassigns *Mexica* artistic expression to Indigenous voices, the entrance of the "Mejicano lenguaje," or *Mexica* language, transmits a body of socioreligious content characteristic of religious poetry from medieval and Renaissance Europe. Moreover, the text conveys her consciousness of colonial Mexico's racial and ethnic diversity. The above-cited passage also affirms Marco Cervantes's term *afromestizaje* as exhibited by Sor Juana's fluid reading of culture and identity in her seventeenth-century Mexican milieu. The lens of *afromestizaje* presents exciting possibilities for revising the link between African and Indigenous cultural fusions in Sor Juana.

Having argued that the African Baroque category embodies an episteme whereby black Africans assess their colonial Mexican world with a situated knowledge that informs their personhood as black and Catholic, I now turn to *Villancico* 232. Performed at the Mexico City Metropolitan Cathedral in 1676 during the feast day of the Immaculate Conception, this *villancico* showcases a black man who stands up against racial discrimination:

Envisioning Power: Chalma and Black Christs in Colonial Mexico," serves as a great foil to the study of black madonnas.

5. For more information on the *tocotín*, see *El teatro en la Hispanoamérica colonial* edited by Ignacio Arellano and José Antonio Rodríguez Garrido.

(Entre un negro y la música castellana.)
—Acá tamo tolo
Zambio, lela, lela,
que tambié sabemo
cantaye las Leina.
—¿Quién es? —Un Negliyo.
—¡Vaya, vaya, fuera,
que en Fiesta de luces,
toda de purezas,
no es bien se permita
haya cosa negra!
—Aunque Neglo, blanco
somo, lela, lela,
que il alma rivota
blanca sá, no prieta.
—¡Diga, diga, diga!
—¡Zambia, lela, lela! (217)

[A black enters while Castilian music plays]
—Everyone's here
Zambio, lela, lela;
We also know
how to serenade the Queen.
—Who's there? —A Little Black Guy!
—Go away; Get out of here; get!
In the Festival of Lights,
an occasion for all things pure,
no such Black things
are allowed!
—Even though I'm black,
we are all white. *Lela*, *lela*!
The soul returns
white and *not* black.
—Preach, preach, preach!
—*Zambia*, *lela*, *lela*!]

Sor Juana exemplifies the African Baroque in this *villancico*, where she reimagines Colonial Blackness in the critical contexts of Christianity and Baroque conceptions of rhetoric. She achieves this through the *Negliyo's* retort to the text's anonymous Castilian voice: "Aunque Neglo, blanco / somo, lela, lela, / que il alma rivota / blanca sá, no prieta." Modifying only slightly the original "I am black but lovely" passage from the Song of Songs—while also reworking Góngora's initial creation of the biblical message—Sor Juana omits *fermosa* and inserts *blanco*. The black speaker's declaration that *all* blacks are White—culturally, socially, and politically—serves an ideological agenda: White is Divine and those who possess a soul are White.

Some critics treat Sor Juana's whitening of the African's soul as the product of a hegemonic imagination that pertains to the *villancico*'s textual liturgical space. Rather than suffering from a spiritual metamorphosis that purifies and relieves the African of her/his Blackness, I read Sor Juana's whitening of the black slave's soul as an ideological speech act to emphasize black personhood in biblical terms. Instead, through the trope of the White soul, she vindicates black Africans' humanity. And to comply with this vindication, it is necessary to acknowledge the specific moment when the poem's "Negliyo" subject—as mediated by Sor Juana—negates his exclusion from

the so-called "Festival of Lights" and "all things pure" by emphasizing his possession of a soul. "Simply put," says Hermann L. Bennett, "the African diaspora—a lived experience—constituted a field of identities made possible by the complexity of Spanish imperial ideology and Christian political thought, which assigned Africans discrete juridical identities as slaves, royal subjects, and *persons with souls*" (*Africans* 5; emphasis mine). Juana's literary *bozales* and their language concretely reflect their historical kin of colonial Mexico. They are more than textual stereotypes. When I attribute a subversive reading to Sor Juana's *villancicos* in *habla de negros*, I am considering Charles V's and his successors' royal actions and concerns. Bennett indicates that royal concerns mounted as the number of *bozales* and their variously defined offspring increased. For *bozales*—both historical from the colonial Mexican archive and literary from Sor Juana's *villancicos*—the acquisition of Christianity meant conversion, baptism, and conformity to an elaborate set of beliefs, norms, and rituals predicated on distinct notions of body and soul, one's worldly existence, and the soul's eternal location in the hereafter. "While the middle passage transformed Africans into slaves," notes Bennett, "scholars have rendered Christian conversion into a cultural abstraction in which static worldviews—both African and European—overshadow the actual mechanisms whereby Christianity insinuated itself into the lives of the slave" (*Africans* 42). Under the guise of *habla de negros* and the *bozales* who spoke it, Sor Juana's *Villancico* 232 captures black agency and subjectivity. Sor Juana's literary *bozales*, with their fluid negotiation and free conception of identity and personhood, confirm Bennett's claims about African subjecthood in the colonies.

Sor Juana, Black Writer

In this essay I have concerned myself with reading Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *Villancico* 224 and *Villancico* 232 as poetic constructions of subversive African voices that lend themselves to an analytic of Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic theory. I have argued that the Black Atlantic serves as a critical tool and discursive geographical space that fosters Sor Juana's ability to humanize the black African voices she portrays in her late colonial *villancicos*. Aligning the Black Atlantic model with Sor Juana's poetic representation of Blackness, *habla de negros*, and their subversive potential uncovers the instabilities and indeed the fluidity of gender, language, and race. My insertion of the Black

Atlantic model into the Sor Juana canon also stages a conversation between two fields—transatlantic Early Modern Studies and Africana Studies—that traditionally have had little to say to each other. With respect to Sor Juana's *villancicos*, Gilroy's Black Atlantic paradigm offers a way of understanding "Blackness" across national borders and outside of homogenous culture or ethnicity. With the goal of reaching a wide readership, I have sought to establish productive and provocative conversations about these two seemingly disparate fields. My closing remarks in this final section will position Sor Juana as a Black writer; or, if nothing else, a writer who expresses sincerity for the plight of blacks in colonial Mexican society.

Retelling her memory of a public lecture given by famed sociolinguist William Labov back in the 1970s, my mentor and teacher Mary Louise Pratt once shared with me that Labov argued that Mark Twain depicted Black English Vernacular in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) more accurately than Toni Morrison and Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*. As retold by Pratt, Labov then directly asked the following question: "So who was more of a black writer?" And as argued by Shelley Fisher Fishkin in her book *Was Huck Black?*,

> Mark Twain's use of black voices in *Huckleberry Finn* may have been an act of appreciation, rather than appropriation. It is an act of appropriation, however, to delegate to that novel the entire burden of representing African-American voices from the nineteenth century, or of engaging students in questions about black-white relations in America. Our classrooms must be as open to an appreciation of African-American voices as was Mark Twain's imagination. (108)

It is precisely this kind of rethinking and reimagining of racial politics in imperial Spanish and colonial Latin American literature, more specifically Sor Juana's poetic creation and ideation of African diasporic voices, that compels me to take seriously Labov's and Fisher Fishkin's thought-provoking inquiries.

Before my insistence is misconstrued as an erroneous misreading of Sor Juana's legacy, life, and literary corpus, I do not claim the poet as genealogically or literally "black." Instead, I situate her as a "Black" writer with a capital *B*, for she embodies a Blackness that is *not* "biological," but rather cultural and performative. What is the critical payoff of such a claim? The claim that Sor Juana was, or could be, a Black writer achieves the following

goals: (1) to show that the methods of Africana Studies can illuminate the texts of legally white writers, thereby making Black an Atlantic Creole cultural universal, and (2) to establish the concept of a historically Black writer. To that end, I offer a model for defining Blackness across the African diaspora that locates and corrects common exclusions found in everyday speech, scholarly canon, and public assumptions.

Emphasizing the poet's ownership of a *mulata* woman, dubious critics may rightfully inquire how can Sor Juana be termed a "Black writer" rather than a *criolla* writer who enlists linguistic usages of blacks in her society? Privileging Sor Juana's legal and social statuses as *criolla* and slave owner is problematic, for it uncritically implies that African-descent people were not slave owners. On both sides of the Atlantic, across the African continent and throughout Spain's colonial kingdoms, black Africans occupied positions of authority and power as slaveholders of indigenous American and African peoples (see Sparks, Restall, and Wheat). Such a view is also rooted in a kind of racial thinking motivated by the need to authenticate Blackness, and it is precisely this premium placed on authenticity, and particularly on black authenticity, that I aim to deconstruct. The fact that Sor Juana was a slave owner does not nullify her ability to poeticize black slaves' subjectivity through their *habla de negros*. Further, my analyses of her *villancicos* underscore the powerful ways in which she establishes a dialogue that centers black Africans' agency, omnipresence, and subjectivity in colonial Latin American literature and culture. I identify Sor Juana as a Black writer in an attempt to mobilize a corrective intervention to commonly held notions of Blackness in transatlantic Early Modern Studies, Colonial Studies, and Africana Studies. My corrective reframes, and does not refute, the conception of Creole discourse as a wavering of language from dominant to subordinate position, resulting in subversions of European models.

So, then, I ask what is Sor Juana's Blackness? I answer this question by focusing on the phenomenology of Blackness. Michelle M. Wright's highly engaging study *Physics of Blackness* explains the phenomenology of Blackness as "*when* and *where* [Blackness] is being imagined, defined, and performed and in what locations, both figurative and literal . . . Blackness is largely a matter of perception made up of moments of performance in which performers understand their bodies as Black" (3). Sor Juana's linguistic embodiment and performance of Blackness—that is, her musicalized and poeticized construction of *habla de negros* speech—turns on the idea that the meaning of her simultaneous poetic-musical creation of *habla de negros*

villancicos is coproduced in the critical act of reading. As performance studies theorist E. Patrick Johnson insists in *Appropriating Blackness*, "the performance of literature has political and social implications for transforming the world. . . . Thus, when non-[black] as well as [black] students perform 'black' texts, the boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexuality identities become blurred" (244). The Mexican rap group *Rak Ric Rack!* as well as the terms *afromestizaje* and African Baroque exemplify Johnson's analysis of performance as a strategy for illuminating the fluidity of black culture, music, and language when interacting with nonblack peoples. The idea of a phenomenological blurring of racial boundaries applies to Sor Juana's poetic depiction of *habla de negros*. What literary scholars and students of literature can learn from viewing Sor Juana as a Black writer is the way in which her poetry performs modes of black language and black cultural forms (most notably antiphony, or call and response, in *Villancico* 232) in *habla de negros* poetry.

My account of Sor Juana's Black Atlantic aims to bridge discussions of African diasporic culture and history in present-day US American and Caribbean cultures with earlier representations of black people in the Ibero-Atlantic world. The potential for this kind of academic shift makes us rethink the diasporic implications of Anglophone European, Caribbean, and African American literary and cultural studies within the context of early modern Iberian texts and vice versa. To conclude, as I frame Sor Juana's Black Atlantic and her poetic representation of subversive black African voices, my goal has been to challenge specialists of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first century African-American and Anglophone African diasporic literatures, cultures, and history to connect the early modern Hispanophone past with their current scholarly interests rooted in contemporary studies of gender, race, and sexuality.

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