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Modernism and Boricua Literature: A Reconsideration of Arturo Schomburg and William Carlos Williams

Lisa Sánchez González

*And if the world will not have it—
if the world will not have her—
then I will turn the world to my way.*

William Carlos Williams (of his mother)

1

Although many would like to claim otherwise, William Carlos Williams (1888–1963) and Arturo Alfonso Schomburg (1874–1938) were Boricuas—members of Puerto Rico’s stateside colonial diaspora—as the evidence surrounding both their families’ histories makes clear. Williams’s mother, Elena Hoheb Williams, was born in Mayagüez, a city on Puerto Rico’s western coast, sometime during the mid-nineteenth century. Elena’s brother Carlos introduced her to her future husband, William George Williams. After they married, the couple moved to the US, ultimately settling in a New Jersey suburb. Although Williams’s father may have been born in England, he was culturally shaped by the Caribbean as well; raised from a very young age in the Dominican Republic, William George Williams was most comfortable speaking in Spanish, which was the primary language spoken in the Williams’s New Jersey household. Without question, William Carlos Williams was born into the diasporan Puerto Rican, Dominican, and West Indian history he publicly claimed both in his *Autobiography* (1951) and, more emphati-

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cally, in his biography of his mother, *Yes, Mrs. Williams* (1959). Williams's migratory family history in the Caribbean, as well as his bilingual, bicultural formation in the US, fit a common profile in the Boricua community during the first half of the twentieth century.

Arturo Schomburg also claimed his Puerto Rican heritage. Likewise, his apparently complicated family history was not at all anomalous within the Boricua community during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ Schomburg spent some time (apparently with his maternal great uncle) in St. Croix while he was still a teenager, then soon after migrated to New York City. When he arrived in the US his life also resembled common Boricua experiences; he became an expatriate activist for Puerto Rican independence, then married, established a career, started a family, and settled in Brooklyn.

Williams and Schomburg are conventionally read as foundational figures for US modernisms; Williams is typically categorized as a "white" American modernist and Schomburg as a key "black" Caribbean immigrant contributor to the Harlem Renaissance. This essay situates Schomburg and Williams as Boricua modernists whose legacies contradict prevailing North American assumptions about modernist poetics and early-twentieth-century racial politics. By examining how their critical contexts in the Puerto Rican colonial diaspora shaped their lives and work, I wish to illustrate how these two figures have been assimilated by a racial allegory that belies the socio-poetic complications of their writing. The juxtaposition of these two figures as Boricua modernists challenges the segregated critical milieus which have claimed them and posits a more precise reading of their transnational and anticolonial registers as American writers.

I aim to center Schomburg and Williams as representative figures of Boricua cultural intellectual history, focusing on both authors' critical appropriations of historical documentation in efforts to revise the master narratives of colonization in the Americas' history. Racism, genocide, and colonialism are core themes in both writers' transamerican inventions and interventions. And since their Anglo- and African-American contemporaries alternately accepted and contested both figures' legitimacy as racial and cultural intellectual peers, their narrative strategies for dealing with these ambivalent ideas about and means of racialization must be viewed in closer biographical and literary historical context.² The explicitly literary aspects of Williams's prose experimentation, and the explicitly polemical aspects of Schomburg's work as an essayist and archivist, further compound the

Within this crisis—or the eternal scripting of Boricuas as culturally alien and racially illegitimate in US nationalist imaginaries—both Schomburg and Williams strive to overcome paperlessness, i.e., the deliberate erasure of not only Boricua but African and other subaltern constituencies in the annals of transamerican history.

hermeneutical crisis I identify for early-twentieth-century Boricua narrative. Within this crisis—or the eternal scripting of Boricuas as culturally alien and racially illegitimate in US nationalist imaginaries—both Schomburg and Williams strive to overcome paperlessness, i.e., the deliberate erasure of not only Boricua but African and other subaltern constituencies in the annals of transamerican history.

Williams's literary strategy involves a new mode of narrating history. Williams approximates transnational American history as a transtemporal plateau of meanings; that is, as an impassioned flux of American signification, "a flow of desire and sexuality . . . a collective assemblage of enunciation, a machinic assemblage of desire, one inside the other and both plugged into an immense outside that is the multiplicity" of American subjectivity, as opposed to any singular racial American subject per se (Deleuze and Guattari 23). Williams attempts to write and read transamerican history as a sensual and living, as opposed to an essentialized and deadened, experience. At its finest moments, Williams's poetics provoke us not merely to witness the violence of the Americas' colonization in his prose, but to *feel* this history, to assimilate the past as a contiguous experience.

However, Williams's project ultimately fails to transcend the racial essentialism he poetically condemns in US (literary) history when he resorts to a conventional model of *mestizaje* (racial miscegenation), a paradigm that simultaneously celebrates Eurocentricity and whiteness and metaphorically exploits the dead, anonymous indigenous woman. This nameless, faceless, ungrieved yet definitive American woman, whom Williams alternately reduces to the earth's sex, functions as an authenticating, fecund trope valorizing a certain fictional exposition of *mestizo* (male bi- or tri-racial) historical consciousness. The violence of colonial American history thus melts away into *mestizo* consensual pleasure, and *mestizo* consciousness becomes the glorious result of men who learned to seduce, and therefore to love, her—América/the earth/dead Indian/woman—properly. As radical as this experiment may read in the Anglo-American modernist context, Williams's reliance on *mestizaje* discourse, which also underlies his nearly complete elision of Africans and slavery in the exposition of colonial transamerican history, not only limits his aesthetic experiment but also undermines its metonymic provocations and evocations.

Schomburg's strategy, on the other hand, is to recuperate the papers necessary for constituting historical archives. Aiming to identify and celebrate black contributions to transamerican civilization, he was particularly prone to research concern-

ing men of African descent. His personal archive became the world's first major collection of transamerican and transatlantic Africana, and is today the African diaspora's largest combined archives. While Schomburg was extremely successful as an archivist, evidence in his private papers suggests that he was considered a racial outsider among some of his most influential African-American peers. Over the past 20 years, however, Schomburg's biography has been reinvented by North American scholars interested in claiming him and his legacy as West Indian American. Schomburg, whose library work was essential to establishing twentieth-century African-American and African diasporan research, and who considered himself black (racially) and Puerto Rican (culturally), has been narrated in the US as *black* and *not black* according to various generations' ethnocentric biases. The scholarly stories spun from Schomburg's life and work thus form some of his legacy's most fascinating and relevant fictions for contemporary American studies.

In effect, Schomburg and Williams perform a Boricua modernism that simultaneously spins *and* reinvents the wheel of American literary history. And though both writers have been posthumously hailed by white and black literary traditions, during their lifetimes their peers contested Williams's and Schomburg's racial and cultural legitimacy. Both figures thus help us to analyze how the Boricua community fractures the North American color line and has been consequently appropriated or erased in US literary history. This eternally contingent dis/affiliation illustrates the need for a new, transnationally attuned dialogue on American modernism. My interest here lies in complicating our readings of modernism in ways that encompass Boricua cultural intellectual contributions in the overlap of African diasporan, (post)colonial Latin American, and US literary history.

2

Each of the chapter-length essays of Williams's *In the American Grain* (1925) meditates on the ways that colonial American literatures capture cultural confluences of post-Columbian social histories. In her 1987 study of Williams, Jay Wright, and Nicolás Guillén, Vera Kutzinski analyzes this prose experiment as an articulation of a "New World" aesthetic that Williams shares with Wright and Guillén, one that counters the conventions of their North American contemporaries. Kutzinski writes, "To unsettle the myth of America, New World writing has to begin by subverting the traditional concept of Literature as a mythical system

that pretends either to transcend itself into a factual system (as in the case of the novel or other prose) or to contract itself into an essential one (as in the case of poetry)” (10). Kutzinski reads *In the American Grain* as a willfully “illegitimate” countercanonical “archive” that, citing a line from Williams’s *Paterson* (1946–58), offers a “relief from meaning” in its usual moral and religious trappings (28–29).

Representing Williams’s innovations in this text as an archive prompts a highly suggestive reading, though perhaps it underestimates the significance of Williams’s appropriation of fiction for his colonial-imperial critique. This core element of his literary strategy resonates with a number of his Latin American contemporaries’ modernist poetics, although the contours of Williams’s literary experiments are arguably unique in this trans-american milieu. *In the American Grain*, for instance, self-consciously invokes a range of historical meanings contiguous with, rather than anterior to, the present. This contiguity invests the present with violent feelings, in particular the emotional residue of Anglo-European racism, moral righteousness, and the colonialist impulse to destroy what cannot be assimilated to a very narrow worldview, all of which Williams interprets as inversions of love in the Americas’ history.

I argue that Williams experiments with metonymic devices that reclaim history as a troubling and tangible presence. Rather than narrating the past as a temporally discreet and distant realm of anterior signification, Williams approaches history as a mélange of affective correlatives that he culls from extant and imaginary historical sources, which together in this text represent the possibility of a sort of coeval empathy in fiction. Therefore what was (signified) in history enters what is (the text’s signifiers) on paper.³ The safely contained words Williams commits to paper—words that explain what the past *means*—actually give way to rendering how the past, in all its dangerous, gruesome detail, *feels*.

In the American Grain is thus less concerned with righting the historical record than with making history “show itself” (116), as Williams puts it, and narrating a transamerican archive of *feelings* to testify to the subaltern experience of the Americas’ history. In this sense, perhaps despite himself, Williams writes like a proto-feminist of color because of his sustained concern with collective subjectivity shaped as an intergenerational reservoir of intimacies that are shaded by affective forces ranging from joy to brutality.⁴

Certain images surface, sink, and resurface again in *In the American Grain* as emblems of desire, though often capsized by sadistic colonial powers. Williams’s clearly gendered images of

the blossoming “white flower” (7), for example, embody the possibility of European man’s sexual and symbiotic—or “steme-notic”—engagement with the land, respect for indigenous knowledge, and the genuine humility necessary for comprehending the New World as the yearning body of a unique spiritual lover. Here we might think of *In the American Grain* as an anti-“foundational fiction” for the Americas, to borrow from Doris Sommer’s phrase, since the consummation between male European lovers and the feminized colonial territory is almost always thwarted. That is, in Williams’s treatment of Columbus, Ponce de León, Champlain, Cortéz, and other historical figures, the Americas’ process of becoming—that sensualized motion toward being, toward coming, or, in his vocabulary, toward “flowering”—is perpetually doomed by ignorance, fear, arrogance, and otherwise violent psychological responses and projections characteristic of the colonial project in the Americas.

By fleshing out a continuum of organic and inorganic affections in his character sketches, Williams shows how these European colonists/suitors, nevertheless, attempted to finesse the bud—the earth’s sex—into opening herself to them. “Cotton Mather’s Wonders of the Invisible World” represents what Williams terms the pathetic “tight tied littleness” of spirit and understanding among the US’s colonists (*In the American Grain* 110), their crude superstitions, their witch hunts, and their bad spelling posing as a moral grammar for the nation’s political imaginary. Williams criticizes this legacy as the backward, ugly, messianic impotence fueling the nation’s “contemporary Puritan imagination” in the central chapter (113), “Père Sebastian Rasles,” which narrates a conversation between Williams and an avid French admirer of American colonial literature. Williams, an exasperated character, proclaims the “immorality that IS America,” the “white savagery” of British colonialists, their “abortion of the mind,” their absence of love—their inhumanity—still haunting us as a perverse and “stinking” presence on the world stage (112–17). What Williams calls “ghostly miasm” [sic], in fact, is revealed as the very thing he attempts to rarefy as the book’s prime object. In his words, this haunting miasma, the US, is “an atrocious thing, a kind of mermaid with a corpse for a tail. Or it remains, a bad breath in the room. This THING, strange, inhuman, powerful, is like the relic of some died out tribe whose practices were revolting [. . . It is a presence that] lives and there [in Cotton Mather’s books] hides, as in a lair from whence it sallies now and then to strike terror through the land” (115). The theme of the US as a vile spiritual “THING”-in-the-world is elaborated further in the chapter “Jacataqua,” in which Williams portrays

the US as an avaricious and shrewd monstrosity, a fearsome “Titan” spawned by wealth and nourished by senseless puritanical fervor. Like Enrique Rodó’s Caliban figure, Williams’s monster represents the US as an uncultured, ineducable, and violent imperial beast whose hyperbolic wealth indulges its pathological desires. Lurking in books and archives, the US presence on the world stage performs its pragmatic rhetoric, its paranoid aversion to others, and its incapacity to love fully, that is for Williams, to love *sensually*:

[North American] wealth, all that is not pure accident—is the growth of fear.

It is this which makes us the flaming terror of the world, a Titan, stupid (as were all the giants), great, to be tricked or tripped (from terror of us) with hatred barking at us by every sea—and by those most to whom we give the most. In the midst of wealth, riches, we have the inevitable Coolidge platform: “poorstateish”—meek. . . . The characteristic of American life is that it holds off from embraces, from impacts, gaining, by fear, safety and time in which to fortify its prolific carcass—while the spirit, with tongue hanging out, bites at its bars—its object just out of reach. (174–75)

The sensual deprivation of the North American—or the basic incapacity to touch, tenderly, the Other—is for Williams the definitive tragic flaw of Anglo-American cultural history. The juxtaposition of the US’s unparalleled power as a nation and its poverty of aesthetic-ethical (read sensual) grace is also an obvious thematic legacy of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Like Whitman, Williams is still cautiously optimistic that the most plausible cure for this collective, unconscious malaise can be found in ethically inflected poetics. The most pronounced disparity between the poets is their mode of narrating the North American spiritual character. For Whitman, the “cosmic” poet’s task is to name and to cherish for posterity the finest national spirit as it emerges, naively (and voluptuously), from the proletarian masses. For Williams, the quintessential American poet is less sovereign as a narrator, since he represents historical violence and its emotional residue as if it were externally shaping the “American grain” on its own (metaphysical) volition.⁵

To foil the US’s repressed and therefore violently enacted sexuality, Williams celebrates the more catholic colonial desire of the French, which finds its most triumphant “blossoming, thriving, opening, reviving” expression in Sebastian Rasles, a physi-

cally handicapped Jesuit missionary whose “tenderness, devotion, insight and detail of apprehension” bore the American colonies’ most “luscious fruit” (121). And here we discover the gendered paradox of Williams’s anti-imperial poetics; the colonial lover can indeed prevail over America, but only if he can seduce her properly. As an emblem of this organically cultivated seduction, laced with institutional authority, Rasles represents a “sensitive mind” and sensual lover for the New World: “Already the flower is turning up its petals. It is *this* to be *moral*: to be *positive*, to be peculiar, to be sure, generous, brave—TO MARRY, to *touch*—to *give* because one HAS, not because one has nothing. And to give to him [that is, the Indian] who HAS, who will join, who will make, who will fertilize, who will be like you yourself: to create, to hybridize, to crosspollenize [*sic*],—not to sterilize, to draw back, to fear, to dry up, to rot. It is the sun” (121). This affirmation marks the critical limit of Williams’s experiment. Akin to other Hispanic American modernists, the seduction Williams presents here as the con/sensual consummation of mutual and liberatory desire between the European (man) and the indigenous (wo/man) erupts in a panegyric tone that clearly inscribes the authenticity of *mestizo* consciousness as *the* American consciousness. Celebrating hybridity, in this instance, is a conceptual trap, since such discourses of *mestizaje* in the Americas tend to gloss over actual caste and gendered inequalities with myths of racial democracy.

Considering that Williams himself had been accused by Ezra Pound of being a “bastard of the Caribbean” and that, in part, *In the American Grain* was a response to Pound’s essentialist taunt that Williams, as a Caribbean bastard, could know nothing about American literature or culture, this celebration of hybridity and “cross-pollination” specifies a polemical function for this history’s North American context.⁶ However, given the broader context of indigenous genocide in the Americas’ colonial history, Williams’s *mestizo* polemic is critically undercut by a central, arguably anthropophagic paradox: the desire for a romantically construed “Indian” as the prototype of organic new-world subjectivity (particularly evident in his chapter on Daniel Boone) alongside the desire to represent this prototype’s social death as that which enables European colonists who truly “cross-pollinize”—i.e., *mestizos*—to engender a modern, more salutary quasi-“Indian” new-world subjectivity. In effect, this poses a clash between metaphor and metonymy in the text; Williams wants to have his authentic American Indian (as a metaphor for America) and to eat him/her too (as the sign split and supplanted by Euro-American subjectivity). Indeed, for Williams the most

meaningful Indian is the dead Indian who can serve his haunto-logical needs. Because Williams understands history as “a tyranny over the souls of the dead” (189), the only hope of liberating the living resides in the resurrection of these dead subjects as food for thought or—as he explains in his chapter “On the Virtue of History”—the resurrection of the dead in literature.

That Williams privileges this kind of rhetorical inversion of genocide and erasure of slavery, seminal characteristics for twentieth-century US Latino poetics, marks his legacy in a distinctively masculinist Boricua fashion. Fully entitled to white male privilege by Latin American standards, but barred from this full entitlement as a Boricua in the US, Williams opted to poeticize history and cultural identity in ways that legitimate both (his) Latin American whiteness *and* his North American Otherness. Like the Boricua community itself at the turn of the century, Williams is a figure forced into the US binary of racial identifications that ironically make him the (nonwhite male) Other of the (black male) Other. Rather than unraveling these complicated subjective dialectics, Williams sublimates them by exploiting the (dead nonwhite female) Other of the (nonwhite male) Other of the (black male) Other, creating a subjective syntax that confounds rather than compounds the Hegelian approach to subjectivity. By relying on the notion of the nonwhite woman’s death—literal, figurative, and subjective, both the primordial American lover and mother—as the grounding, procreative, and (sexually) satisfying referent for *mestizo* consciousness, Williams deforms and deadens the very trope that would otherwise ensure that this consciousness will not be haunted by its own violent foundational episteme.

Another blind alley in this text (also characteristic of *mestizaje* discourse) is how Williams virtually elides African presence in the Americas’ history. Lola Ridge, author of one of the first reviews of *In the American Grain*, comments on this elision, stating that Williams’s “treatment of the Negroes, a people who have given so much to America’s spiritual and aesthetic life, is singularly inadequate. He is not unsympathetic—far from it. But he approaches them as a spectator and seems to watch, fascinated, a single gesture that, in all its variations, becomes *his* beauty—to be segregated and kept pure for his perpetual enjoyment. He is grateful for their joy, the ‘quality’ they brought to America—and of which they had so much that all their giving has not left them bankrupt. But [she cites] ‘all the rest is to keep from having to say anything more . . . it is their beauty’” (149). Ridge’s point is well taken: why is it that Williams neglects to include the African diaspora as an integral part of the New World’s human

drama? To make sense of slavery, survival, and involuntary cultural syncretism as core elements in his poetic reinvention of transamerican history? To elaborate on the contribution of Africa to what he defines as the racially, culturally, and ethnically pluralistic Americas?

This elision deserves close consideration. As a Boricua, Williams himself was a member of a multiracial community. Although he was born and raised in New Jersey long before Boricuas settled there in any large numbers, Williams's medical internship was in a New York City public hospital, where he most likely was one of a few bilingual doctors (*Autobiography* 93–105).⁷ As interested as he was in the Americas' racial histories, it seems impossible that his own community's multiracial composition in the New York area escaped his characteristic acumen. Indeed, in his biography of his mother he calls clear attention to Caribbean racial miscegenation. "*In the West Indies, in St. Thomas, Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo—the races of the earth mingled and intermarried,*" Williams writes, adding an awkward anthropological comment, "*imparting their traits one to another and forgetting the orthodoxy of their ancient and medieval view*" (135–36). Closer to home, he volunteers his own possibly multiracial background in this text, carefully scripted in a somewhat confused sentence: "Nothing is known of our family beyond the last three generations and not all of that—other than vague rumors, enticing, irritating, scandalous—racially doubtful in certain cases" (132).⁸ Furthermore, he was well read in Latin American history, so he should have known about the significant (in many regions, majority) African demographic across the Americas during the colonial era. For these reasons, Williams's all but complete disregard of the African presence in transamerican colonial history is troubling.

Perhaps a pragmatic reason for this elision is that Williams's main resource for writing *In the American Grain* was the American History Room of the New York Public Library (NYPL), which did not have "the original records" of African diasporan history that he required for his project.⁹ The Schomburg collection was purchased by the Carnegie Corporation and donated to the NYPL during 1926, a year after *In the American Grain* was published, so it stands to reason that Williams did not have access to Schomburg's archives, which, again, constituted the world's first major African diasporan public collection. Yet, before his archives were made public, researchers traveled from all over the globe to visit Schomburg in Brooklyn, where over 10,000 documents and artifacts were stored in his famous cluttered apartment on Kosciuszko Street, and other writers, like W. E. B.

Du Bois, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Claude McKay, and Pura Belpré, knew how to find him. Dr. Julio Henna, a mutual acquaintance of Williams and Schomburg, could certainly have introduced them had either one requested a meeting. Yet it seems neither was inclined to strike up a relationship with the other, even though both apparently crossed the “color line,” as it were, in their professional and personal lives.

That Schomburg and Williams adopted black and white US-based racial identities is, to a great extent, responsible for their never meeting. Puerto Rico has never been the racial democracy that many of its cultural historians would like it to be. Moreover, the racial and class conditions in New York, New Jersey, and even Paris would have exacerbated the insular Puerto Rican and Dominican brands of racism which Schomburg had experienced and of which Williams was well aware.¹⁰ While Schomburg and Williams both attempted to reject US and Puerto Rican nationalist identities and simplistic evocations of race through their archival (re)inventions, as Boricuas who could not quite fit on either side of the color line they both also attempted to situate themselves on either side of this divide, in the process becoming habitually checked or embraced as useful outsiders. This definitive dilemma of Boricua social history during most of the twentieth century further complicates aesthetic and ethical tensions usually narrated as a racial divide—white versus black—in US modernist scholarship (Hutchinson). Perhaps one of the greatest (and underexplored) contributions of Boricua writers to American literature is this complication of the color line.

3

Schomburg contributed to the African diaspora’s cultural intellectual tradition by, as he defined it, shaping a “republic of arts and letters” from a recuperation of documentary history in Spain and the New World (Schomburg, “In Quest” 154). He defined diasporan subjectivity in contrast with national identity (his ideal republic being, after all, bibliographically constituted), and he elaborated this racial constituency along a broad spectrum. Resonating with the later work of Edouard Glissant, Schomburg suggests including Caribbean and Latin American communities within the African diaspora, attending to the complexities of the Americas and accounting for not only US institutions of slavery but also Luso-Iberian caste systems of the Carib-

bean and Latin American colonial and slavery eras. Unlike African diasporan theorists who only analyze Anglophone documents and histories (see Gilroy; James), a language privilege based in US imperial prerogatives, Schomburg's interests ranged beyond the US and the Anglophone West Indies. As a multilingual man of color, Schomburg understood that racialization throughout the Americas was born of diverse experiences of slavery, miscegenation, cultural syncretism, and politics, and he formed an inclusionary historical rubric in which to situate the African diaspora's transatlantic and transamerican archives.

Schomburg was preoccupied with questioning fractured color lines. As his archival papers suggest, he was habitually suspicious of cultural discourses that denied the Africanity of Hispanic-Caribbean social history, in particular intellectual and state-sponsored evocations of *mestizaje* and *criollo*-isms that claim to embrace but actually erase African diasporan presence in the Americas' history. Schomburg's archives provided irrefutable evidence that people of African descent made substantial and definitive contributions to the founding and cultures of American nations. But, he argued, these civilizational legacies have been appropriated and renamed as essentially Euro-American via the language of cultural—as opposed to racial—fusion. For example, in response to the notion of *criollo* identity as a white racial legacy—popularized in the Caribbean during the late nineteenth century—Schomburg explained that *creole/criollo* was, historically, a black moniker. This argument appeared in the journal *Light* in 1927:

[T]he name Creole applies to the Negro born in America in contradistinction to the one brought from Africa. So the fair damsel who goes the round trying to make people believe that the word Creole has a charm to make people think it stands for a person descended purely from white stock, is nothing short of nonsense. Cervantes, the author of *Don Quixote*, is clear, and Tirso de Molina is unequivocal in his explanation. So that the fellow who goes the round of society trying to make people believe that the soft word of being a creole puts him across the bar will have henceforth to dig up his family tree for, like old words, it is getting obsolete. ("Creole-criollo")

Clearly, Schomburg was perturbed by Latin American and Caribbean claims to "white purity." His critique of this mode of passing is relevant to contemporary Puerto Rican nationalist dis-

courses as well, since *criollo* has been appropriated as a nostalgic, nineteenth-century white cultural formation, despite Schomburg's efforts.

Schomburg outlined the multiracial layering of his version of *creolité* in his response to a published letter by John Crosby Gordon. Schomburg claimed that Gordon's argument "obscure[d] the issue of Black and White, and the various degrees of shade of color" in the transamerican context (Arthur A. Schomburg Papers; emphasis added). Apparently, Gordon had argued that, as a result of miscegenation, racism was no longer an issue in the Caribbean, and that consequently the only authentically black experience was US-based, to which Schomburg replied:

No people can brush away with an article, sp[e]cious in its construction, three hundred years of an awful oppression as suffered by men of African descent. We know that in nearly all parts of the British West Indies the practice, rather than the exception, is for members of the household as soon as they come up to the point or degree of light hued color—coffee and milk—where they can pass muster, are gone over to the other side and live in a pseudo-atmosphere of being classed as nearly white, they generally form a society based on their light-hued skin. At which time they look down on the poor black with disdain [who,] unless he can return home from Cambridge or Edinburgh with his parchment attesting to his superiority to his fellow native and his pseudo-equality with the unlettered white, is relegated to the Limbo of uncertainty. (Arthur A. Schomburg Papers)

Schomburg continues with a litany of social conflicts based in intraracial hostility—Haiti comes first to his mind, then Cuba, then, ultimately, Washington DC—where the "nearly white" brigades fight their own "sable brothers." Schomburg's analysis of the color line at once extends the creole net to include all peoples of African descent in the Americas and critiques US-centric understandings of African diasporan history. This is a quintessentially Boricua doubly-bound racial articulation, in which blackness and whiteness do not necessarily correspond to the US color line, but race and racism are nevertheless *the* definitive concerns. Nowhere is this clearer than among the people Schomburg claimed as distinguished members of the African diaspora—such as Anita Otero, Juan de Pareja, and Antonio Maceo—who look more Latina/o than black according to US racial/ethnic stereotypes.

Some scholars assert that Schomburg distanced himself from the Boricua community because he felt more at home among African Americans (see James; Sinnette). However, a study of Puerto Rican settlement in the New York City area documents that Brooklyn, where Schomburg lived, also had a Puerto Rican enclave as significant at the time as the East Harlem community (see Sánchez Korrol). Evidently Schomburg may not have been geographically marginalized from the Boricua community in his daily life. Likewise, much has been made of his disassociation with the Cuban and Puerto Rican expatriate activist community, though few critics note that the community's political organizations basically disbanded after the 1898 US invasion of Cuba and Puerto Rico. Even if Schomburg had been inclined to continue the struggle for Puerto Rican independence, he would probably have had to go it alone. Because the premise of the US invasion was decolonization (obviously a ruse but, at the time, activists believed the US was not interested in colonizing Puerto Rico), the *independentista* agenda in New York effectively dissolved after 1898 and only reemerged decades later when Schomburg, no longer as interested in activist leadership, had already become a full-time archivist and librarian.¹¹

Scholars who want to claim Schomburg's legacy as a West Indian/African-American radical represent his entry into US Afrocentric activities as a seamless and organic process. The most recent attempts to reinvent Schomburg's biography are creative and impressive in their efforts to fathom something that defies the tacit boundaries between Boricua and African-American studies.¹² Afro-West Indian American scholarship on Schomburg is an invaluable resource for understanding intraracial cross-cultural relations in the US context, particularly the rift between Puerto Rican and African-American academic understandings of Caribbean-US radicalism.

Schomburg also faced resistance among some African Americans who doubted his black identity, a painful issue that Schomburg discussed allusively in his private letters.¹³ As an oft-cited passage by Claude McKay proposes, Schomburg's apparent resemblance to the popular "Gypsy" stereotype—his locks of curls, his olive skin tone, his clear brown eyes, etc.—gave some African Americans the idea that he might easily pass as "nearly white": "In appearance [Schomburg] was like an Andalusian gypsy, olive-complexioned and curly-haired, and he might easily have become merged in that considerable class of foreigners who exist on the fringe of the white world. But because of his African blood, he chose to identify himself with the Aframerican [sic]

group” (McKay 140). In similar fashion, rendering his Puerto Rican and Dominican background as the dark, exotic, and mysterious side of Williams is a perennial device among Williams scholars, usually couched in essentialist flourishes on his middle name. As late as 1994, we are still finding allusions to Williams’s full name “as a vehicle for publishing his ‘dark’ side” or his “alien Spanish heritage,” a certain “wildness” suggested by “Carlos” firmly checked and tamed by his “Anglo-Saxon” first and last names (Ahearn 2). Even Julio Marzán’s study of Williams’s “Spanish American roots” relies on bifurcating his Anglo and Latin consciousness, drawing a distinction between “Bill” and “Carlos” as alter egos; Bill being an “exterior” Americanized mask that “camouflaged” Carlos, his “inner self” (2). Though problematic, Marzán’s attention to Williams’s engagement with his Puerto Rican heritage adds an important set of issues to Williams scholarship, issues, it is worth noting, that have been attacked in print as Marzán’s articulation of “nationalistic propaganda” (Oliphant 71). Furthermore, despite Williams’s explication of his mother as a typical middle-class Puerto Rican with typical Puerto Rican claims to distant European heritage, scholars still seem reluctant to relinquish the portrayal of Williams’s mother as a Franco-Caribbean woman. Consistent with nineteenth-century Puerto Rican bourgeois sensibilities, his mother’s Francophilic tendencies hardly establish anything more than a willful (and often playful) Eurocentric affinity, which Williams gently parodied in both his *Autobiography* and *Yes, Mrs. Williams*.

Like others in their community, Schomburg and Williams were racially “suspicious” in a national context of routinely policed racial borders, in which communal belonging is guarded from the inside as well as the outside. Hence the general amnesia concerning Williams’s Puerto Rican heritage. Hence too the propensity for African-American and West Indian appropriations of Schomburg’s archival work and the simultaneous disregard of Schomburg’s own writing, which is obviously inflected by his Puerto Rican background and research interests.

The most illustrative example of this disregard among the African-American intelligentsia during Schomburg’s lifetime is an episode never discussed among his biographers. In January 1932, Schomburg was asked to take a leave of absence from his temporary post as curator at Fisk University’s library to tend to his collection at the NYPL. When news hit the surrounding community that Schomburg would replace the African-American woman then in charge of the collection, Catherine Allen Latimer, Schomburg met organized resistance mobilized by

W. E. B. Du Bois. This controversy was first covered in a Harlem newspaper called the *Defender*:

The library powers that be have designated Arthur A. Schomberg [sic] “curator pro tem” at the 135th Street branch, thus superseding Miss Latimer of Brooklyn, much to the discomfiture of friends of Dr. W. E. B. Dubois [sic], editor of the *Crisis* and an associated Harlem colored group, it has been reliably reported. . . .

A few years ago Schomberg [sic] accepted a nominal price of \$10,000 for his collection of historical and literary data on colored people, including the works and writings of colored authors. It is on file at the 135th Street branch and formally labelled “The Schomberg [sic] Collection.” This exhibit has come within the jurisdiction of Miss Latimer, and it is Schomberg’s [sic] supersession of her for a year by orders of “downtown” that has sent the DuBois group on the war path, it is said.

It is reported that friends of Dr. DuBois and a committee of Harlemites made a formal protest at the main library located at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street against the change and even went so far as to demand the ousting of Schomberg [sic]. (Arthur A. Schomburg Papers)

Thus, eight years after he sold his archives Schomburg’s collection had become an institutional wedge for promoting and retaining an African-American librarian, and his entitlement to spend time organizing and supplementing his archive was subordinated to this agenda by one of the era’s most influential African-American intellectual groups.

I did not find any correspondence between Du Bois and Schomburg that would indicate the two had discussed Schomburg’s proposed appointment in 1932, although documentation does show that Schomburg eventually accepted this post as an “unpaid consultant” (Ortiz 79). Thus, despite his reputation as the premiere African diaspora archivist, Schomburg was still deemed an outsider in New York City’s African-American intellectual politics. A week after the *Defender* article, a piece in the *AfroAmerican* clarified Du Bois’ position as not opposed to Schomburg per se, but in advocacy of black librarians in the NYPL, which his group thought Schomburg’s temporary appointment threatened.¹⁴

While the *AfroAmerican* article would suggest that hiring, promoting, and retaining African Americans in the NYPL was the Du Bois group’s prime objective, the paper also suggests that

Latimer's authority over the collection was a major concern. As the reference librarian, Latimer would have had the everyday run of the collection, as well as the power to catalogue the collection's items and to influence acquisitions. Thus, beyond the ostensible concern over employment, the controversy signals a struggle over representation as well. Despite the lack of documentary evidence of a power struggle between Schomburg, Du Bois, and Latimer, we can infer that part of this negotiation might have concerned Spanish-language text acquisitions. In a November 1934 letter from Schomburg to Joaquín Becerril, editor of the San Juan paper *La Voz del Obrero* (*The Worker's Voice*), Schomburg explains that he is eager to acquire more Puerto Rican texts to augment the collection at the 135th Street branch, expressing his desire to provide Spanish-speaking readers and researchers access to the books that document black contributions to the full spectrum of the Americas' arts and letters, particularly in Puerto Rico:

In our library, one of the forty-five funded by the City of New York, is a reference department and study area (a gift from millionaire Andrew Carnegie) where we have more than ten thousand books concerning the Black race from Africa to América. . . . We have a great number of books in the language of Cervantes and Calderón de la Barca, *but we are anxious that books by Puerto Ricans* like Eleuterio Derkes and Tomás Carrión *have a place in this establishment*; we only have a single book by Gonzalo Marín and P. C. Timothee.

We are prepared to pay you to obtain these works for us, or pay you to let us know where we might find them. . . . We have no copy here of Sotero Figueroa's "Biographical Essay," published in Ponce in 1888. (Arthur A. Schomburg Papers)¹⁵

Schomburg's private papers include no return correspondence from Becerril and none of the titles Schomburg requested were ever acquired by the 135th Street branch library. We will probably never know whether or not the failure to acquire these texts resulted from Becerril's apparent indifference to Schomburg's project at the NYPL or the NYPL's administrative indifference toward shoring up the 135th Street branch's tiny collection of Puerto Rican authors of color. However, Schomburg's efforts indicate that he felt a compelling interest in maintaining the representational scope of the collection he founded, and his colleagues' disinterest in this project displays both insular Puerto

Rican disrespect for him as a black researcher and African-American disrespect for him as a Puerto Rican researcher.

4

Both Schomburg and Williams recuperated documentary evidence, and each crafted a distinctive critical agenda alternately aligned and at odds with their transamerican contemporaries. Williams resorted to a deconstructive mode of literary historical recuperation, while Schomburg devoted his life to a literally constructive one. Yet, as disparate as their aesthetic projects were, both Schomburg's legacy and Williams's *In the American Grain* attest to a singular Boricua predicament of Americanization, caught in US socio-historical constructions of blackness, resulting from a specific experience of slavery, and whiteness, resulting from a specific colonial desire to torture and consume the racial Other.

This reconsideration of Schomburg and Williams as Boricua modernists suggests some provocative questions about American studies, since it forces us to ask some fundamental questions about how racial and ethnic identifications inform Boricua literature in the context of other US-based literatures and communities of color. If, for example, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts, African Americans in the US faced the challenge to "write themselves into being" as the prime criterion for establishing their humanity, their reason, and ultimately their American subjecthood in the New World (*Loose* 57), or if, as Vine Deloria argues, the members of North America's first nations were ironically forced into the human category by colonists whose only motive was to entitle them, literally, to sell their land (172–73), then what can Boricua critics cite as our foundational episteme as dis- and rearticulated subjects in the continental US? If for blacks the key issue in struggling for human legitimacy can be historically traced in and around US slavery, and if for American Indians this same struggle revolves around alien bureaucracies violently imposed on them because of their indigenous relationship with the earth, then how do we cast Puerto Rican diasporan subjectivity as negotiated under the Manichaean allegories of blackness and whiteness, of savagery and civilization, of cultural citizenship and alienized alterity?

Answering this theoretical challenge begins with finding the paperwork—the essays, novels, position papers, and other primary documents of the Puerto Rican diaspora's cultural intellec-

tual history—a corpus which has been habitually subjugated and disappeared by colonial allegories and administrators for the past century. Once recuperated, contextualized in twentieth-century American literary history, and duly read as a socio-aesthetic project, Boricua literature performs as an antidote to a paperless condition unique among US ethnic communities. Paperlessness denotes a chronically alienated subjectivity, a hermeneutical crisis based in an endless cycle of deferral in US nationalist imaginaries, a cycle that perpetuates Boricua alterity despite documents that should guarantee a legitimate referent (citizenship) and an enunciative center (literature). Conscious of and conscientious about this alienation in the US, Boricua narrative proposes more inclusionary genres of fiction and public intellectual advocacy. Predicated by specific historical relationships to land, literacy, cultural citizenship, and colonial migration, Boricua modernist literature evinces a new racial, cultural, sexual, and class-inflected poetics within American literature, and constitutes a corpus of writing in which transracial, translingual, and transcultural legacies radically reshape the substance of and standards for archival recovery and literary experimentation.

Notes

1. Schomburg's birth certificate clearly identifies his mother as Puerto Rican. "Schumburg" was entered on this document as his maternal grandmother's surname; Arturo Alfonso was born out of wedlock, and thus legally retained his mother's maiden surname. Furthermore, since his mother was Puerto Rican, it is likely that his father (whom he apparently never met) was also Puerto Rican. Since *Schomburg* or *Schumburg* was a German immigrant family name in Puerto Rico, it is also likely that in fact his maternal grandmother was either born in Puerto Rico herself or married her daughter's Puerto Rican father, and therefore it is also probable that the relative he claimed as his maternal grandfather in St. Croix was instead his great uncle. Although his biographers have trouble with these facts of his Puerto Rican family history, the documentary evidence is as yet irrefutable. I have discussed at length the motives behind the myth of his family history, including the sexist subtext of his anxieties of paternity as well as the perpetuation of this myth in contemporary scholarship, such as in Gates, *Africana*; Sinnette; and James. See also Sánchez González.
2. Strategies, in this sense, involve Michel Foucault's theorization of discourse, "truth effects," and knowledge, or the implication of language itself as the mediating ground for both maintaining and countering existing relations of power. Complicating this Foucauldian reading of discursive strategies are Schomburg's and Williams's multiple racial and cultural backgrounds as well as the transnational dimensions of their intellectual formations, literary interests, political motivations, and other lived experiences as members of the Puerto Rican colonial diaspora.

3. Following Jacques Lacan's reading of language, the unconscious, and Sigmund Freud's notion of displacement (160), this aspect of Williams's poetics is metonymic (rather than metaphoric) signification. Crucially, however, Williams reverses the psychological impulses Freud assigns to displacement: for Freud, displacement is one of the unconscious mind's devices for *forgetting* something shocking or uncomfortable, while for Williams such metonymic displacement in literary historical discourse is a shocking and uncomfortable way to *remember*.

4. This collapsing of time and ethos might also be read as a sort of diasporan literary juju, or "conjure"—Houston Baker's term for certain African diasporan sensibilities—by which an author "causes definitions of 'form' as fixed and comprehensible 'thing' to dissolve" (43–44). This narrative ethics is likewise akin to what Jacques Derrida terms a "hauntology" (10)—the literary resurrection of the dead as spectral beings caught between the absence of history and the presence of the living, invoking a certain, definitively disturbing clan of transtemporal *zeitgeister* (time-ghosts) who vandalize European languages and aesthetic processes within (and because of) the new world order.

5. On a biographical note, spiritual possession was not an alien concept to Williams, as the stories he wrote of certain episodes in his mother's house would suggest. More could be said of how Williams may have been inspired in his poetic theories—the grasping of an intangible, immediate "thing"—by the epiphanic moments his mother experienced. See *Yes, Mrs. Williams* and *Autobiography* (15–17).

6. This issue surfaced in Williams's friendship with Wallace Gould as well. In his *Autobiography*, Williams recounts, with characteristic nonchalance, Gould's taunt that his sons needed to be sent south to be made into "white men" (259). Gould's remark apparently infuriated Williams's wife.

Moreover, compared with the wild primitivism of some of his modernist contemporaries—Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" (1909), for example, or just about anything by D. H. Lawrence—Williams's argument here is also less jarring in its own literary historical context than it might appear in light of more contemporary racial and gender critique.

7. Many of Williams's Spanish language passages in *Yes, Mrs. Williams* indicate that he had some difficulties writing in Spanish, but this kind of limited formal literacy despite functional oral proficiency is common in the Boricua community.

8. In his biography of his mother, Williams makes note of her family's downward social mobility during her adolescence, explaining that, given the family's financial circumstances, her sojourn in Paris was intended to provide her with some sort of professional training in music or art. In an interesting though subtle allusion, he also narrates how he found Elena in bed one night earnestly practicing her pronunciation of "s" in Spanish (apparently made more difficult by her false teeth), capturing what could be read as an indication of his mother's class and racial anxieties (*Yes, Mrs. Williams* 118–19). Pronouncing the ultimate "s" as an aspirant commonly signifies the dialect of the racialized poor in Puerto Rico. Evidently, Williams was aware of the socio-linguistic suggestion of this kind of pronunciation, since he included his mother's joke on the subject soon afterwards in his text (121).

9. See the second title page in *In the American Grain*; see also *Autobiography* 183–84.

10. Williams's acquaintance with racist-sexism in the Caribbean's context is illustrated in the following passage from *Yes, Mrs. Williams*: "When Georgie, our colored girl, who could peg a stone left-handed over the top of the chestnut tree next door, which neither of us boys [Williams and his brother] could do, when this Georgie climbed over the top of the grape arbor back of us to get into her room at two A.M. Pop knew about it, as he always did. Next morning at breakfast table with sleepy-eyed Georgie stumbling over him, he let her have it. That word out of my father's mouth surprised me; it hurt, but it was meant to—straight from the West Indies" (10).

11. After 1898, Schomburg's organizational affiliations tended to revolve around his scholarly interests. He was a member of the American Negro Academy, and president of the organization from 1920 to 1929 (Ortiz 63). Politically, Schomburg was affiliated with liberal organizations such as the NAACP, the Urban League, and a number of other local and national civil rights organizations.

12. As I have discussed at length elsewhere; see Sánchez González.

13. Schomburg took offense when he received such xenophobic insults. This is elaborated in private and public correspondence. An example is a letter he drafted to editor Wendell Phillips Dabney of the Cincinnati paper *The Union*. Apparently, a minister in Cincinnati publicly told Schomburg to "go home" to Puerto Rico. The remark riled Schomburg, who responded by elaborating his service to the cause of Puerto Rican independence (Schomburg Papers).

14. This article appeared on 30 January 1932:

NEW YORK—Charges that W. E. B. DuBois, editor of *The Crisis*, was bitterly opposed to the appointment of Arthur Schomberg [sic] as temporary curator of the 135th Street branch library, were denied by friends close to the editor, this week. . . .

From persons familiar with the part played by Dr. DuBois in the controversy it is said that the fact of the matter is that for years the group has been trying to get colored library assistants into the public library, meeting a great deal of difficulty. . . .

Two years ago Dr. DuBois is said to have taken up the matter of one appointee who was not getting promotion as she deserved. A quiet, but insistent conference resulted in her appointment as first assistant librarian, the highest appointment that we have had. . . .

"Many of us," representatives said, "immediately protested, not against Mr. Schomberg [sic], but against the demotion of Mrs. Latimer. We all expressed together with Mrs. Latimer the highest respect for Mr. Schomberg [sic] and rejoiced at his connection with the library, but we insisted that this was no excuse for demoting or changing the work of Mrs. Latimer.

"As a result of our protest, Mrs. Latimer retains her third grade position and remains as reference librarian of the Schomberg [sic] Collection." (Arthur A. Schomburg Papers)

15. The English translation is in the body of the text out of consideration for non-Spanish language readers. My translation and emphases.

Standardizing Schomburg's letter in Spanish would entail extensive revisions of the document. I have refrained from overhauling Schomburg's syntax, though I have modified some of his spelling and punctuation. The passage from the original is as follows:

En esta biblioteca, una de las cuarenta y cinco que dotan la ciudad de Nueva York, regalo del millonario Andrés Carnegie, existe el departamento de referencia y estudio donde tenemos más de diez mil libros sobre la raza negra desde Africa hasta América. . . . Tenemos un buen número de libros en el idioma de Cervantes y Calderón de la Barca, *pero estamos ansioso que figure[n] en este establecimiento los libros de los [sic] puertorriqueños* como Eleuterio Derkes [y] Tomás Carrión; solamente tenemos un libro de Gonzalo Marín y P. C. Timothee.

Nosotros estamos dispuestos a pagarle por conseguirnos estas obras o indicarnos dónde se pueden conseguir. . . . Por acá no hay una copia del libro de Sotero Figueroa "Ensayo Biográfico" que fue publicado en Ponce [en] 1888.

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