“What Happens on the Other Side of the Strai(gh)t? Clandestine Migrations and Queer Racialized Desire in Juan Bonilla’s Neopicaresque Novel Los príncipes nubios (2003).”

Gema Pérez-Sánchez
Chapter 2
What Happens on the Other Side of the Strait?

Gema Pérez-Sánchez

Andalusian writer Juan Bonilla (b. 1966) surprised the Spanish literary world in 2003 with a cynical portrayal of human sexual trafficking in a globalized market in his neopicaresque novel, *Los principes nubios* (*The Nubian Prince*), in which the first-person narrator, Moisés Froissard Calderón, “hunts” for prospective sex workers among exhausted, hungry, clandestine male and female immigrants washed ashore along the European Mediterranean coast. Moisés chooses the most beautiful, healthiest immigrants and convinces them—by promising to fix their residency papers and to reward them with lives of luxury—to work for a few years for the high-end prostitution ring “Club Olimpo,” which caters to rich, capricious

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1 Many thanks to Jessica Folkart and Pamela S. Hammons for their thorough comments on earlier drafts of this paper; to my University of Miami colleagues Suzanne Braswell and Anne J. Cruz, who generously offered their expertise in French literature and Golden Age picaresque novels, respectively; to Hakim Abderrezak for inviting me to participate in “Burning the Sea: Clandestine Migrations in the Age of Globalization,” a symposium at the University of Minnesota in April 2013, where I presented an earlier version of this argument and received insightful feedback; to Silvia Bermúdez, for sharing sections of her forthcoming book with me; and to Jessica Folkart and Maryanne L. Leone for sharing their essays on Bonilla with me prior to their publication. This essay is written within the framework of the Spanish research project FEM 2011-24064, supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación).

2 All translations of Bonilla’s novel, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from Esther Allen’s English version (Picador). Page numbers of the Spanish original appear after the quotations in that language, and page numbers for Allen’s translation follow quotations from the English version. In paraphrased sections, I include two sets of page numbers: the first refer to the Spanish version, the second to the English. Note that Allen has chosen to render singular—*The Nubian Prince*—the plural Spanish title—*Los principes nubios*. Unfortunately, this erases the character of Irene, a Mauritanian woman with whom Boo, the African immigrant to whom the English title refers, falls in love while they are forced to perform sexual acts as a couple of “Nubian Princes” for Club Olimpo’s clients.
international clients and charges exorbitant fees for the sexual services of carefully
groomed, perfectly trained, sometimes surgically enhanced prostitutes. Moisés
agrees to work as a "hunter" (or "scout") for the club by convincing himself that
his task will "save lives":

You may well be wondering what sort of work I did, what I mean by "saving
lives." Well, I wasn't saving people the way firemen or lifeguards do; all they
really save are bodies. [...] My job was to seek beauty, to plunge my hands into the
world's muck and bring up pearls. I cleaned those pearls, made them presentable,
prepared them to acquire the value that was rightfully theirs. I traveled to places
where poverty had hidden these treasures; I searched them out with infinite
patience and rescued them. That's what I mean by saving lives. (3--4)

Moisés's comeuppance arrives at the end of the novel in the form of a violent
physical attack and rape by Boo, his most precious "pieza" (prey)—a six-foot
tall, muscular total-combat boxer and clandestine immigrant from Sudan who
eventually has enough of being sexually and racially humiliated by Moisés and by
"Club Olimpo" (270-72; 238-9). Boo's violent anal rape of Moisés—the climactic
moment in the narrative—confirms many homophobic and racist anxieties of the
Spanish imaginary.¹

In order to contextualize the argument about Los príncipes nubios, the first part
of this essay provides a brief map of a unique Spanish confluence of homophobia
and racism that is particularly directed against Maghrebian and African immigrants
and is prevalent in Spanish films and narratives about migration. Establishing this
context—albeit in an extremely condensed fashion—allows for an understanding of
Botilla's novel as an instance of this unique cultural confluence.² The second part
of the essay examines how the novel borrows from the picaresque tradition—the novel's narratological structure, its blending of facts and grotesque
exaggeration, its emphasis on the problematic family life of the protagonist—and the
author's misdirection regarding genre to illuminate the peculiar paradox and
moral ambivalence of this purportedly politically progressive novel with ambitious
literary aspirations. This essay argues that Los príncipes nubios dramatizes an
"acting out" of racist and homophobic Spanish fantasies of sodomitical rape—an
acting out that exposes Spain's incapacity to envision a democratic project that
recognizes both immigrants' and LGBTQ individuals' rights simultaneously.

³ "En qué consistía tu trabajo?, preguntarían, ¿qué debemos entender por salvar
vidas? Bueno, no salva vidas como los bomberos o los socorristas: en realidad ellos no
salvan más que cuerpos. [...] Yo me dedicaba a buscar la belleza, a introducir las manos en el
fango y sacar algunas joyas a las que limpiaba, adecuaba y preparaba para que cobrasen el
valor que merecían. Me desplazaba allá donde la miseria escondía algunas de esas presas.
Con paciencia indomable las buscaba y las rescataba. A eso llamo salvar vidas. (12)

⁴ Hence, my word play with the "Strai(gh)t" of my title.

⁵ In the larger book project from which this essay is extracted, several other literary
and filmic texts—and the historical and political contexts in which they were produced—are examined to demonstrate the prevalence of this particular intersection of homophobia and racism.

This novel can be read as a disturbing symptom of an era in Spanish history in
which the confluence of several relatively new phenomena has severely challenged the
unity and intelligibility of what Benedict Anderson has famously called the
"imagined community." On the one hand, the sizeable influx of immigrants since
the 1990s—some of them "irregular"—into a country that had previously sent
emigrants abroad itself but that now must adjust to being fully integrated into
Europe, has forced Spaniards to contend with the limits of their own previously
imagined and recently acquired modernity. On the other hand, added to well-known
micro-nationalist tensions in Spain has been the emergence of new progressive
legislation at the national level on issues of gender equality, gender identity, and
sexual orientation. In 2005, Spain passed Law 13/2005, which legalized same-sex
marriage; two years later, the approval of Law 3/2007 allowed citizens to register
their gender in the National Registry without proof of gender-reassignment surgery.
One reason behind these progressive laws is that they respond to Spain's desire to
be recognized by the rest of Europe as sharing and, in the case of the United States,
surpassing their values of modern citizenship rights. These laws also respond to
Spain's wish to finally obliterate and bury its repressive fascist past—what in another
context Bruce Robbins has called "feeling global" (6). Through its new gay and
transsexual rights laws, Spain has furthered its perception abroad as a progressive,
liberal, modern country, and it has secured an increased stream of gay tourism from
abroad—not a minor issue in a country whose economy depends a great deal on
tourism income. Nonetheless, legal gains for women and sexual minorities have
not come without a rabid backlash that has led to increases in violent acts against
women, gays, lesbians, transgender people, and immigrant collectives.⁶

Some scholars, such as Silvia Bermúdez, have argued that, as progressive as the
new laws are for sexual minorities, they overlook matters of ethnic equality,
especially the integration of immigrants into the nation as citizens with equal rights
under the law, and they may serve as a smoke-screen to distract citizens from other
pressing matters, such as the integration of multilingual immigrants' children into
the educational system (Bermúdez). It is important to understand this confluence—
unique to the Spanish context—of vigorous, unusually progressive legislation in
matters pertaining to gender identity and sexual orientation, with conservative
legislation regarding the protection and integration into the cultural fabric of the
country of newly arrived immigrants. In this regard, interlocking fears of the racial
"Other" and about the fragility of certain extreme forms of Spanish masculinity
present a danger for immigrants, onto whose bodies these anxieties become
projected, often violently. Daniela Flesler and Patricia Grieve have convincingly
shown that, from the perspective of Spaniards, most relations—real or imaginary—

"Spain receives the second highest revenue in the world from international tourism
and the first highest in Europe" (España en cifras 2013 49)

⁷ See Olga Arias Simón and Rafael M. Mérida Jiménez's, Los géneros de la violencia:
Una reflexión queer sobre la "violencia de género" ["The Genders of Violence: A Queer
Reflection about 'Gender Violence'"] for staggering statistics on violence against women
and LGBTQ people in Spain.
between Spaniards and Moroccans are articulated through the composite of medieval and Renaissance ballads and legends of King Rodrigo, Count Julián, and la Cava Florinda. These ballads (romances) recast the presence of North African migrants in medieval Spain as a punishment for King Rodrigo’s lust. According to this mythical reinterpretation of history, Christian King Rodrigo raped la Cava Florinda, the daughter of Count Julián, who was the Christian governor of Ceuta. The ballads indicate that, in revenge for this rape, the “traitor” Don Julián allowed surreptitious passage into Spain to the “invading Moors.” In her analysis of these legends, Flesler points out that, “as governor of the city of Ceuta, Julián inhabits a liminal space between Africa and the Iberian Peninsula” (“De la inmigración marroquí” 77). As Flesler explains, in the stories recounting how King Rodrigo raped Florinda (thus provoking Don Julián’s revenge in the form of “opening the door” to Spain to the “moors”), “[the] theme of rape or forced sexual relations with the enemy appears as a metonymy of territorial conquest included in a long tradition of stories of exchange between the Iberian Peninsula and the North of Africa” (“De la inmigración marroquí” 80). King Rodrigo’s punishment famously comes in the form of “a rape by a gigantic snake” (Flesler, “De la inmigración marroquí” 80), who kills him by eating into his heart through his genitals. Several critics agree that Spanish stereotypical views of the “invading Moors” confine North African migrations with sexual invasion (Flesler, Folkart, Grieve, Pérez-Sánchez). Jessica Folkart, for example, asserts that there is a “ghostly fear of cultural subjugation” that “evokes Peninsular stereotypes and fears of the Moors as sexual invaders who sodomized their Christian victims” (Folkart, “Scoring” 369). Because Julián is governor of Ceuta, this colonial Spanish bastion in Northern Africa becomes marked (as well as Melilla) as a sexualized, interstitial, “treacherous” geography from which the sexual invasion of the “Moors” is staged.

In addition to Ceuta and Melilla, the Strait of Gibraltar is often figured as another sexualized interstice, literal and imaginary, of the historical cartographies of migration between Morocco and Spain. This space contains the bodies of dead immigrants who fail in their attempts to cross over to Spain. It is a strait both of hope and despair for them, whereas in the Spanish imaginary, it is the space of anxiety and fear of an “invasion” of the so-called Moors. El estrecho, in Spanish, elicits contradictory meanings: it is the narrow gap that almost allows the two continents to touch, but it also evokes “un estrecho” or “una estrecha”—that is, one who does not yield to the sexual advances of another.

During the infamous and appallingly racist incidents in the Spanish Southern town of El Ejido in February 2000, in which Spaniards burnt down the dwellings of Moroccan and other Maghrebian immigrants and chased them out of town through violent attacks, the town mayor, Juan Enciso, a member of the conservative Popular Party, depicted the South of Spain as “la puerta de África” (“Africa’s door/the door to Africa”) (cited in Flesler, “De la inmigración marroquí” 75). The metaphor of “Africa’s door/the door to Africa” is appropriately ambiguous, for it suggests that Spain guards the entrance to the supposed European paradise from its invasion by Africans, but it is also grammatically slippery enough to imply that Spain itself may be Africa—that is, the entry point into Africa—thus unconsciously reifying the French view that “Africa starts at the Pyrenees.” Many European politicians would probably agree that Southern Spain is indeed the “door” where the “European Fortress” (another prevailing metaphor in European discourses on immigration) has been breached. Considering the sexual anxieties coalescing around the legends of King Rodrigo and Don Julián, and the additional connotation of El estrecho as a tight space, a sort of rectum, reluctant to be penetrated, it is not far-fetched to discover in Spaniards’ imaginary (and actual xenophobic reactions to the arrival of Moroccan immigrants), a dimension of homophobic panic. It should not escape us that “la puerta de Africa,” through which many immigrants arrive, may also be imagined as a sort of south or back door, the rear of Europe.

The interesting thing about the ass is that it always belongs to “the other,” the foreigner. In the European tradition, and especially in the Spanish one, the stuff about the ass is a matter for the Moors. For Arabs, it is us Europeans who go over there asking to be fucked in the ass. [...] It is always the person from the next village over who practices sodomy, it is never something belonging to your “nation” or culture. In the Middle Ages, sodomy was punished because it was an infidel practice, one coming from Muslim peoples. (34–5)11

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10 This reading of Spain as the back door of Europe overlaps with Folkart’s in “Scoring”: “[If] Europe is culturally conceived as Spain’s future, its forward view, then Africa is feared to lurk, literally and figuratively, at Spain’s back door” (369).

11 I have translated directly into English all quotations from critical works originally written in Spanish. On the subjectivity-forming power of the anus and the prohibitions around it in Spanish culture, in addition to Sáez and Carrascosa’s study, see Spanish queer theorist Beatriz Preciado’s Manifiesto contra-sexual (1971ff) and Taring yonqu (210–31), in which she studies how the anus is a key eritre of gendered social control. Paco Vidaire, in his Ética marica, calls for a new form of LGBTQ ethics, an “analética” (“Analathics”) that would be based on the following premise: “To make of the ass our political instrument, the fundamental mandate of another type of LGBTQ militancy, to design a very basic anal politics: everything inside, receive everything, allow everything to penetrate and, towards the outside, only let loose shit and farts; that is our scatological contribution to the system” (88–9). The antisocial quality of Moisés is also addressed elsewhere from the perspective of queer theory (Pérez-Sánchez “Perilous Straights”). On the antisocial in queer theory, see Vidaire and Lee Edelman. The obsession with sodomy, the anus, and scatology is prevalent in Spanish culture, particularly in relation to forms of gendered and racial control.
This anxiety about imaginary penetration by the “invading Moors” appears explicitly in several contemporary Spanish cultural products. The fear of sodomy is clearly at the bottom (pun intended) of many Spanish cultural products—mostly, but not exclusively, those produced by men—and Bonilla’s novel is no exception.

In this complex context of competing national and literary imaginary projects around immigration and sexual minorities, Los prinici pes mibios emerges as alarming evidence of the symbolic (and real) racial, gendered, and sexual violence at the core of Spain’s participation in the neoliberal system of globalization. In fact, one could read this novel as a monumental “acting out” of the ingrained racist, sexist, and—above all—homophobic anxieties of the Spanish imaginary. The term “acting out” here is used in its Freudian sense—that is, as an “action in which the subject, in the grip of his unconscious wishes and fantasies [sic], relives these [wishes and fantasies] in the present with a sensation of immediacy which is heightened by his refusal to recognize their source and their repetitive character. [...] Acting out often takes the form of aggressive behavior directed either at the self or at others” (Laplanche and Pontalis 4). In Los prinicipes mibios, acting out is directed at the immigrants themselves, who are constantly cajoled into what can only be termed a perverse form of sexual indentured servitude. This manipulation is accomplished through an insidious, constant rhetoric of “salvation” from poverty and through the suggestion that being a prostitute in Spain grants them privileged entrance into the paradise of European pleasures.

12 In film, this is particularly obvious in Carlos Molinero’s 2001 Salvajes, which is critical of Spaniards’ mistreatment of immigrants. In the film, a neo-Nazi adolescent skinhead, who is repeatedly taunted by his peers for being insufficiently masculine and who is accused of being gay, exorcises his internalized homophobia, first by beating a clandestine Senegalese immigrant almost to death, and second by provoking a knife fight—in which he dies—with his neo-Nazi friend who has been teasing him. A significant opinion voiced by a neo-Nazi character bears mentioning here, because it illustrates the homophobic and racist, sexist, and—above all—homophobic anxieties of the Austrian immi grante: “This is no accident that the prostitution ring is called Club Olimpo, thus invoking the legendary home of the Greek gods.

Forms of acting out are specially directed at the Spanish self, represented by Moisés, who seems to embody a clueless, initially well-meaning, neoliberal European citizen unaware of his own secret sexual desires and racialized fantasies of colonization and possession. Thus, the final rape of Moisés arguably enacts an allegorical national fantasy of self-punishment: Spain “deserves” to be fucked in the ass for itself “fucking” immigrants— a masochistic fantasy akin to Joan Goytisolo’s famous self-inflicted, fantasy rape scenes in Don Julián. From the 1980s (the first decade of the democracy) until now, Spain has changed from a country that had been perceived by Europe as marginal to the global economy, to a developed country that fully participates in the neoliberal project. Most scholars agree that this economic success has elicited negative cultural responses. For example, Cristina Moreiras-Menor appropriately characterizes the culture of Spain from the 1990s on as a “wounded culture, a culture in shock,” devoid of any utopian outlook, and “marked by a total absence of government, corporatist, or global European-style projects other than monetary integration” (135). This is the context in which Bonilla’s novel emerged, and like other literary works from his generation, it manifests this cultural shock and a lack of any utopian project. At a certain level, the novel denounces the sexual and psychological violence and exploitation perpetrated on victims of human trafficking from the global South. Bonilla achieves this critique through two main literary devices. First, he creates a complex, narratological scaffolding that includes a narratee and the narrator’s darkly comic running metanarrative commentary. For example, Moisés often wishes he could be an omniscient narrator; goes so far as to name his ex-girlfriend Paola’s Rottweiler “Narrador Omnisciente” (“Omniscient Narrator”); kills the dog with one of Paola’s exercise weights when it viciously attacks him; and then lamoons throughout the novel that he does not have an omniscient narrator. Second, Bonilla also achieves social criticism on one level by following the structure and tropes of the long-standing tradition of the picaresque. However, on another level, Bonilla’s novel reaffirms a form of racism that intersects with homophobia and that is typical of many contemporary Spanish cultural products that represent immigration. Several critics

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14 In discussing the generation of writers to which Bonilla belongs—the so-called Generación Kronen or Generación X, writers who were born in the 1960s and started publishing in the 1990s—Cristina Moreiras-Menor emphasizes the prevalence, in most of these writers’ works, of “violence, sex, disease, addiction, terror and, above all, boredom,” which I identify as instances of the type of “acting out” of unsustainable fantasies (141) discussed in this article.

15 It is no accident that the prostitution ring is called Club Olimpo, thus invoking the legendary home of the Greek gods.

16 For an insightful analysis of how the ambiguous relation between sexual desire and capitalist desire in Bonilla’s novel converts the immigrant body into a “consumable commodity,” see Villamandos (199). For a positive, convincing Levinasian reading of the ethical change Moisés undergoes, see Leone (146).

17 See Pérez-Sánchez, Queer Transitions, on Goytisolo’s masochist fantasy of self-rape (87–92).

18 For an analysis of the novel that focuses specifically on human trafficking, consumerism, and Levinasian ethics, see Marianne L. Leone.

19 This episode poetically mimics the famous killing of the dog, Chispas, in the canonical neorealesque Spanish novel by Camilo José Cela, La familia de Pascual Duarte.

20 Whereas I focus on the ethically ambivalent project of the novel, Leone argues that Los principes “moves towards subjectivity grounded in an ethical encounter with an Other” (149) and that it “asks: what is the ethical responsibility of contemporary Spanish citizens before global inequalities given their position in a well-off society?” (146).
have argued that the unexpected, sexually violent climax of the novel points to Spanish culture's ambivalent relation to the intersections among global market forces, sexual desire, and condoned gendered violence (Villamandos, Folkart). Los principes nubios displays a pornographic fascination with homophobic sexual violence at the same time that it critiques human trafficking, the sexual exploitation of irregular immigrants, and other immoral effects of globalization. But it achieves the latter through enacting a very traditional, crass form of Spanish homophobia, the one that responds to the lamentable, yet very common Spanish insult, "que te den por el culo" (["up yours"]).

Although Bonilla himself has emphasized that the boundaries between journalism and literature in his writing are porous and shifting, it is important to emphasize that this novel does not provide necessarily a "real" representation of what is actually happening in Spain: all the characters and events in the novel are deliberately distorted and exaggerated, even though a few background episodes, as Bonilla confesses, are indeed taken directly from events reported in newspapers. For example, in an interview, the author reveals that an incident in his novel—in which a group of thirty captured clandestine African migrants at a Spanish airport covered their bodies with their own feces to prevent deportation by the police—was taken verbatim from the newspaper El Mundo, for which Bonilla worked as a journalist (Bonilla, "Los principes nubios. Literatura de frontera"). Grotesque, deforming exaggeration is the hallmark of the important Spanish literary tradition of esperpento, to which Bonilla also pays homage in his novel. Bonilla has confirmed this affinity in several interviews. Regardless of Bonilla's insistence to which Bonilla also pays homage in his novel. Bonilla has confirmed this affinity in several interviews. Regardless of Bonilla's insistence that the novel follows the techniques and traditions of Ramón del Valle Inclán's esperpento (Bonilla "Los principes nubios: Literatura de frontera"), I concur with Alberto Villamandos and Santos Alonso that the novel owes more to the traditional Spanish genre of the picaresque and to its twentieth century iterations and revisions.

That Bonilla would not want to classify his novel as picaresque is significant in itself, as it suggests an ambivalent critical impetus in his project—one he has occasionally tried to deny. In the picaresque, the reader might feel contempt for the picaro—whose narrative is often a self-justification of his socially unacceptable actions—but s/he may also be led to sympathize with the picaro's amoral use of irony and humor. In addition, Bonilla has argued that novels ought not have a thesis or make a political intervention and that this novel is categorically not about denouncing the ills of immigration (Bonilla, "Los principes nubios. Literatura de frontera"). I suspect that Bonilla does not call attention to the actual literary tradition in which the novel is inscribed— the picaresque—to deflect attention away from the fact that he indeed means it as a critique of current Spanish social ills, including the country's embrace of neoliberalism and globalization, and its citizens' racism towards immigrants. Furthermore, he may have been motivated to obscure the literary tradition to which he pays homage to avoid having his novel labeled "novela de inmigración" ("immigration fiction"), which could relegate his work to a sub-genre that some critics consider marginal, too political, or merely constituted by a "novela de tesis" ("novel with a political position") that fictionalizes sociological studies of Spanish ills. Instead, even a cursory reading of Bonilla's novel reveals that he engages in an ambitious aesthetic project of high literary quality and intertextuality with the Spanish tradition of the early modern picaresque and the post-war neopicaresque.

Hence, like the masterpieces to which it pays homage—Lazarillo de Tormes (1554), Alemán's Guzmán de Alfarache (1599; 1604), Quevedo's El Buscón (1626), and Cela's La familia de Pascual Duerte (1942)—Los principes nubios (through the picaresque, Moisés), makes scathing critiques of the underbelly of a society that, on the outside, appears to be economically thriving, modern, and triumphant, but which, below the surface, wallows in the most abject deprivation, poverty, and exploitation. It is not a coincidence that Moisés, after the success of his first photographic reportage of the miserable life of children who search for food and found objects in piles of trash in Bolivia—one of his only attempts to make an honest living through his artistic talent as a photographer—tries unsuccessfully to sell another photographic documentary of "a war," which is, in fact, culled together from photographs he has taken in the poorest areas of the Spanish city of Sevilla (55–6; 42–3). Bonilla comments here on the abysmal life conditions in inner-city areas of important Spanish cities—Sevilla, Málaga, Madrid, and Barcelona—are satirized in this novel—by comparing them to underdeveloped regions, thus challenging the dichotomy Global North/Global South as well as Spain's status as a developed country.

The incisive critiques are achieved through a deeply flawed character's first-person narration—a character who eventually admits to the narrative at the end of the novel that Moisés was not a savior of lives but, as the ghastly voice of his dead father in a faded recording repeats, a "canalla" ("scumbag," "villain," or "ruffian") (291; 258). Moisés exploits vulnerable clandestine migrants, and the migrants' revenge is exerted through extreme, criminal violence, making the novel remain deeply disturbing and morally ambiguous. Thus, the novel enacts not only the blurring of genres (between journalism and fiction), but it may also unfortunately encourage...
of the genre that are reflected in Bonilla’s novel include the following: the unreliable first-person narrator, who is of lower class or marginal status, narrates his misadventures to a dramatized but never-seen narratee, and constructs his story to show his social ascent and eventual descent; the rogue’s autobiographical narrative is of an episodic nature and is constructed to justify his loss of honor, commencing with an explanation of his dubious familial origins, separation from his family and birthplace, and descriptions of premature experiences in life; the picaresco often travels to different locations, working for different masters, most of whom abuse him; he learns tricks from these masters about how to survive in a corrupt environment and often seeks revenge for their abuses; the tone of the rogue’s narrative is markedly ironic and distanced, often offering moral, religious, or philosophical commentaries about the human condition and the characters he encounters in his travels, frequently giving way to satire (Guillén, “Toward a Definition of the Picaresque” 83). Formal and thematic characteristics of the picaresque and neopicaresque are clearly reflected in Bonilla’s novel, demonstrating that the author obfuscated the true genre of his work to divert attention away from its critical content.

Like most picaresque and neopicaresque novels, Los príncipes nubios offers a complex narrative structure that attempts to lure the inattentive reader into sympathizing with its narrator-protagonist. Moisés Froissard Calderón’s first-person narrative voice attempts to compel the reader to identify with him, as noted us, “this genre’s definition is anything but simple” (Cruz, ed. 3). It is not the purpose of this article to engage in great detail with or to challenge any of the well-established theories of the picaresque and the numerous academic discussions about whether it should be distinguished as a genre (Caba Aseguinolaza, Dunn, Guillén, Sieber, Sobejano); a myth (Guillén); a mode (Wicks, Caminero); or a “cauce de presentación” (“vehicle of presentation”) (Alameda 98).

26 Claudio Guillén famously claimed: “The picaresque novel is, quite simply, the confession of a liar” (“Toward a Definition of the Picaresque” 92).

27 In contrast to these general features of the early modern Spanish picaresque novel, Irene Zoe Alameda, in her recent study of the neopicaresque novels of postwar Spain and Germany, proposes six characteristics for contemporary neopicaresque fictions: (1) the extensive description of violence; (2) a deformed and distorting vision of reality; (3) problematic paternity and a rejection (especially of male authority); (4) a denunciation of capital; (5) the construction of a character with strong psychoanalytic connotations (by which she means the prevalence of rogues with a strongly marked Oedipal complex that develops into a hatred of the mother); and the tendency for the protagonist to be either artists or criminals (Alameda 216). Los príncipes nubios fulfills all of them. For an extended discussion of the neopicaresque traits of the novel, see Pérez-Sánchez, “Perilous Straigh(ths).” 28

see cruz, ed. Approaches to Teaching Lázaro de Tolosa and the Picaresque Tradition for the most recent and approachable overview of the picaresque tradition. For prior canonical studies of the picaresque, see especially cruz’s Discourses of Poverty, Guillén, Cabo Aseguinolaza, Dunn, Rico, Sieber, Sobejano, and Wicks. Two helpful recent summaries and evaluations of all the critical theories of the picaresque, from Guillén on, can be found in Garrido Arriba and in Meyer-Minnewein and Schlickers, eds.

some readers to cheer at homophobic acts of violence precisely because they are committed as well-deserved forms of revenge by the clandestine heterosexual immigrant on the camilla Spanish. In other words, it seems Bonilla tries to elicit sympathy for the plight of the clandestine migrants by having the audience root for an aggressive heterosexual, the African boxer who brutally rapes, pummels, and almost kills the púno, effete Spanish protagonist. Indeed, Moisés defines himself as “eterosexual” (92; 75) precisely to avoid taking on explicitly the labels “homo,” “bi,” or “heterosexual” and, in spite of several opportunities to come out as gay, refuses to do so: “Whenever I asked myself why I sometimes felt desire when looking at a beautiful male body [...] I answered myself: you’re eterosexual. I imagine that this meant, or was intended to mean, that I wouldn’t dare to take my desire for certain men beyond the level of fantasy” (75–6). Moisés’s homosexual tendencies are exhibited later in the novel, when he experiences an erection while looking at a painting of Saint Sebastian: “One of the retablo’s paintings was a magnificent illustration straight out of a gay magazine: the saint—naked, young, and very beautiful, his flesh like marble, his muscles pure sculpture. [...] The scene was exciting, and I was surprised to notice that my crotch was starting to bulge. [...] Ashamed, I turned toward the priest to see if that would diminish my desire” (133). In this and other examples of Moisés’s internalized homophobia and shame, Bonilla seems to appeal to the Spanish reader’s newly acquired sense of progressiveness towards gays and lesbians. After all, his novel was published in 2003, when the public and political debates that would eventually lead to the approval of Law 13/2005 and Law 3/2007 were heating up. The tacit question at the core of Bonilla’s characterization of Moisés (and a question posed directly by La Doctora to Moisés) seems to be: “coming out is not such a big deal anymore, so why can’t Moisés admit that he is gay?” Such textual examples reinscribe a more insidious kind of homophobia that blames the victim for not coming out of the closet and justifies the homophobic violence inflicted on him. Additionally, it might be argued that this type of abject violence is just another instance of the typical life blows that all pícaros suffer from Lazarillo on. Moisés’s rape, in this reading, would be just another type of violent humiliation suffered by all pícaros.

Indeed, Los príncipes nubios follows this and most of the other widely accepted characteristics of the picaresque. The general traits of the early modern examples
by Maessos, one of the book’s first reviewers: “nos reimos con él” (“we laugh with him”) (63). Readers laugh, despite the fact that Moisés is an amoral drifter who, throughout the novel, rationalizes a series of unethical life-decisions involving the sexual exploitation of African clandestine immigrants. Moisés’s meta-narrative consciousness throughout the work responds directly to the general characteristics of prior Spanish pícaros. As Guillén argues:33

The picaresque novel is a pseudo-autobiography. This use of the first-person tense is more than a formal frame. It means that not only are the hero and his actions picaresque, but everything else in the story is colored with the sensibility, or filtered through the mind, of the pícaro-narrator. Both the hero and the principal point of view are picaresque. Hence the particular consistency and self-saturation of the style. Life is at the same time revived and judged, presented and remembered. (“Toward a Definition of the Picaresque” 81)

Such is the case with Moisés’s narrative: the memories and motivations that lead him to convince immigrants to become prostitutes are all presented in such a manner as to explain his final punishment. Likewise, the tension between Moisés’s self-justifications and the poetic justice that befalls him reveals the presence of an implied author that judges and condemns this character Moisés throughout the work. Also important in understanding the dense narratological construction of this novel is the presence of a narratee. Recall, for example, the famous beginning of the foundational picaresque text, Lazarillo de Tormes: “Pues sea Vuestra Merced, ante todas las cosas que a mi me llaman Lazarillo de Tormes” [Well you should know, Your Grace, in the first place that they call me Lazarillo de Tormes]; or that of the most popular representative of the genre, Francisco de Quevedo’s El Buscón: “Yo, señor, soy de Segovia” [I, Sir, am from Segovia]; or, that of the twentieth-century neopicaresque novel by Nobel prize winner Camilo José Cela, La vida de Pascual Duarte: “Yo, señor, no soy malo” [I, Sir, am not evil].34 With a slight variation on the tradition, Los principios nubios has the peculiarity of addressing a plural audience of narratees, instead of a single one: “Pensarán que exagero” [“You [all] may think I’m exaggerating”] (11; 3; my emphasis in all quotations). This audience of narratees is not a readership per se. Instead, in keeping with Bonilla’s critique of narratees, instead of a single one:

Moisés’s narrative self-consciousness allows Bonilla to update sarcastically the Golden Age narratee from being a figure of authority with the capacity to pass judgment and possibly inflict a punishment on the pícaro to becoming the senseless, media-manipulated reality-TV audience of the twenty-first century, whose only capacity for judgment is focused on the entertaining value of the subject being interviewed.

In addition, this crucial passage condenses several aspects of the picaresque at the same time that its meta-narrative dimension suggests the presence of a double-voice beyond the narrator himself, offering glimpses of the implied author and his ethical and literary project. The implied author anticipates, through Moisés’s chatter with the narratee (a conversation that might be happening in his own

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33 Fernando Lázaro Carreter was one of the first critics of the genre to systematize the theory of the picaresque’s narratee. See Lázaro Carreter 45–134 and Garrido Aridla 50–51.

34 Solo entrevistarme a mí mismo cada noche, antes de dormir: Unas veces el motivo de la entrevista era que había sido ganador de un Gran Slam y otras que había salvado de morir calcinadas en un incendio a catorce personas. Otras veces me entrevistaba por haber conquistado el corazón de una famosa estrella de Hollywood, o por haber sido el único que había fotografiado el momento en que una bala se alojaba en la cabeza del Papa. Cualquier psicoanalista de la Seguridad Social—incluso cualquier estudiante de psicología, y puede que cualquier vendedor de unos grandes almacenes—me hubiera dicho: muchacho, tienes delirios de grandeza, tú lo único que quieres en esta vida es ser famoso, hay algo en tu pasado, quizá la indiferencia con que te distingrieron tus padres, que te empuja a hacer algo grande, algo que te inmortalice, que consiga que te reconozcan en todas partes. Sea como fuere, de la mayoría de las entrevistas que a mí mismo me hacía, obtenía la impresión de que mi principal facultad consistía en sacar lo peor de cada persona. Creo que esa frase la pronunciaba en algún momento de todas las entrevistas, como si fuese una virtud que los demás debían alabar, como si mi misión en esta tierra [...] fuese servir de espejo deformador de todo el que se acercase a mí. En realidad acababa convenciendo a mis hipotéticos entrevistadores a quienes siempre seducía, por supuesto, de que por muy impresionante que fuera aquello que yo hubiera hecho y por lo que me entrevistaban, lo que había debajo, lo que descubrían al rascar un poco, era una naturaleza sorprendente que les iba devolviendo una imagen desasosegadora de sí mismos. (26–7)
head), that this narrator will convince his audience—through narrative and sexual seduction—of his superior humanitarian goals. Therefore, the reader cum TV audience should be attentive to the game of seduction and obfuscation that Moisés plays. Bonilla himself has expressed shock at the fact that, during some of his public readings of the novel, readers approached him to praise the work and to tell him that they felt completely identified with Moisés. Bonilla’s response was astonishment that those readers could not see that he had created a despicable character and that identification with him was not what the author expected. 35

This anecdote emphasizes Moisés’s purpose in reflecting back to the audience “a disturbing image of themselves, reflected in [his] unusual temperament” and warns those unsuspecting readers who are bamboozled by a consummate liar who prevaricates to the audience and himself.

Moisés’s parenthetical comment about the possibility that his parents’ lack of interest in him may be the source of his delusions of grandeur also echoes the traditional problematic family origins of the picaro. Whereas the early modern picaro was always under suspicion of not being a pure-blood castellano viejo, Moisés’s problematic origin has become translated into his ambiguous sexual orientation. In his narrative of his home life, Moisés presents his progenitors in an unflattering light. His mother suffers from a depression—described throughout as “lo suyo” (18) [“her little thing” (9)]—that leads her to commit suicide. Moisés subly characterizes this depression as a first-world, middle-class housewife’s mere ennui at her purposelessness (18-19; 9). In keeping with the schema of the picaros, Moisés gradually shows the reader how he resembles his mother and displays her same pathologies, including lack of focus and purpose in life, general emotional manipulation of others, and depressive tendencies.

Furthermore, Moisés’s diction when inviting the audience to “scratch” below the surface of his image to see the worst of themselves is not innocent, as it connects him with his mother’s pathologies. One of the most baffling, yet amusing, ticks Bonilla attaches to his narrator is an unsightly, untimely, persistent itch in his testicles that increases in intensity as he becomes more depraved and self-deluded:

For some time now I’ve been suffering from a psychological breakdown that has chosen to reveal itself in a very comical way: itching. As soon as I lie down, my testicles start to itch. Go ahead and laugh; you have every reason to. It’s a tragic situation that no dermatologist has been able to do anything for. They prescribe painkillers, tranquilizers, creams, but nothing helps. The itching starts up no matter what. I’ve started to call it “my little thing”; I have no other name to give it. I’ve accepted the fact that it’s a punishment, that I’m being punished, and of course it could hardly be more significant that my guilt has chosen to manifest itself down there. (45) 36

His “little thing” here echoes his mother’s “little thing”—both exaggerated euphemisms for two serious illnesses: hers leads to suicide and his almost costs him his life. Since the itching subsides only when Moisés masturbates and when he is enthralled with Boo’s narrative of his childhood and his motivations to emigrate from Sudan (230), one might speculate that the itching (el pico) that requires a “scratching below the surface” is both symbolic of a sexual itch and his bad conscience. 37

Also, the etymological relation between pico (noun), pícaro (verb) and picaro is obvious. His criminal ways and his bad conscience are physically manifested in this itch he must relentlessly scratch:

There was no solution. Sometimes I scratched so ferociously that I broke the skin, and then it got even worse, the stinging made me curse my own rage and lack of self-control, and the resulting sores didn’t just fuck up my life when I lay down in bed at night like the itching; instead I’d walk around at all hours of the day and night as if I’d been sodomized by Mazinger Z. [...] I would often try to gain some relief by masturbatng. The comfort was fleeting. (66) 38

After he has viciously scratched his scrotum, Moisés’s description of walking as if he has been sodomized by a giant robot foreshadows Boo’s rape. As a first-person narrator, Moisés controls the organization of his narrative, and like all picaros he tries to manipulate how the narratee perceives his story and judges him. Moisés knowingly prepares the narratee with this comment to connect his guilty conscience with his itch and to anticipate that his punishment (much as King Rodrigo’s punishment with the snake) will come through his genitals.

Adding to the layers of irony around Moisés is the polysemantic and symbolic nature of his name. His first name, Moisés [Moses], as several critics have suggested, is ironic, as he claims to be “saving” lives, like the biblical Moses, but he instead recruits them to lives of prostitution, debasement, and violence. 39

The dermatólogo, Me recetan anestesiantes, ansioliticos, cremas: nada que hacer. Los picores se presentan igual. Ya he empezado a llamarlo “mi cosa,” porque carece de nombre que darle. He aceptado que es un castigo que se me ha impuesto, y que el lugar que ha elegido mi culpa para manifestarse sea precisamente ese no puede ser más significativo.” (58-9)

Similarly, Leone reads this itch as a symptom that Moisés’s “body rejects the dehumanizing sexualized consumer culture in which he participates, targeting his sexual organs” (156).

A veces me rascaba con tanta rabia que me acababa haciendo heridas en la piel, y entonces las cosas empeoraban, el escrozo me hacía maldecir mis rabias y mi poco dominio sobre mí mismo, y no sólo me jodía la vida, como el pico, cuando de noche me tendía en la cama, sino a todas horas: caminaba como si me hubiera sodomizado Mazinger Z. [...] Yo conseguía procurarme alivio masturbándome. Era un alivio perecedero. (82)

For example, Folkart indicates that “The ironically named Moisés makes his living by evacuating these bodies from disaster and leading them to the ‘promised land,’ where [they] are dispatched to satisfy the sexual desires of those who dwell on the affluent side of a national boundary or endure unscathed by catastrophe” (“Socatológico” 3); Villamandos suggests that “el motivo de la salvación del otro, enfatizado en la carga bíblica de su nombre [Moisés], se convierte en una constante y al mismo tiempo en parodia de un humanismo...
symbolic meaning of the first of his two last names, Froissard, is more complicated to ascertain. "Froissart" does not exist as a word in French, but it comes close to the French verbs, froisser and se froisser, which literally mean to crease or fold, and figuratively to offend and to be offended, respectively. Furthermore, the adjective froissant is applied to offensive events or people. Both the figurative meanings (to offend or to take offence at something) and the meaning of the adjective (shocking, uncivil, vexing) accord best with Froissard since, on the one hand, his sensibilities are easily hurt and, on the other, it seems that Bonilla created him with the aim of offending most readers to shake their consciences. Moises is offensive, annoying, shocking; he makes visible the "ob-scene," which should not be seen—a fact emphasized by his interest in photography, in manipulating what is seen.40 Considering that one of the literal meanings of froisser is "to crease," one might argue that it also involves the creasing or folding of a map.

Susan Martin-Márquez, in her groundbreaking analysis of Spanish–Moroccan and Spanish–African colonial and neocolonial relations, observes that, "The notion that geographical form may reveal the essential character and destiny of a nation [...] shapes many of the texts that, beginning in the modern era, seek to define Spain's ties to Africa and justify neocolonial interventions" (259). The history of relations across the Strait is fraught with geographical tropes of mirroring and sameness (Folkart, "Scoring" 354; Martin-Márquez 105, 165; Pérez-Sánchez, "Imaginando historias" 559–60), suggesting that the landscape similarities on both sides of the Strait might also imply similarities in culture and character, a sameness that creates great anxiety in the Spanish imaginary, as many scholars have argued (Martin-Márquez, Fiesler, Folkart, Pérez-Sánchez). Martin-Márquez quotes a Spanish Africanist, Tomás Borrás, who asserts that, "If you trace out the map of Spain and Morocco and you fold the paper in two along the Strait of Calpe [Gibraltar], you'll find that the tectonic systems of both sides coincide exactly. God has commanded that unity be formed out of this geographical space. And the fathom is doubly asserted, since the two tablelands that are defined by the fortified walls of the Pyrenees and the Atlas [Mountains] are inhabited by the same race" (Borrás 11, quoted in Martin-Márquez 259).41 "Froissard," then, in its French literal meaning of "to crease" might also suggest that imagined cartographic fold that mirrors both sides of the Strait.42 Most likely, however, the character's first last name may be a veiled allusion to the medieval French priest Jean Froissart (c. 1337–c. 1405), author of the chronicles of the Hundred Year's War; Froissart's chronicles are told in violently graphic, almost pornographic detail—much as the violence that Boo finally inflicts on Moises's body is depicted in this novel.43 Finally, his second last name, Calderón, points to the canonical Golden Age literary figure, Calderón de la Barca (1600–1681), author of La vida es sueño [Life is a Dream] (1629–1635) and the famous poem "Poderoso caballero es Don Dúnero" (["Mighty Lord Is Money"], a sharp critique of greed and the emerging capitalist economy in seventeenth-century Spain. This last name, Calderón, might also help Bonilla to emphasize, in an indirect, erudite manner, the historical parallel he establishes between the colonial, imperial Spain of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the neocolonial, neoliberal Spain of the early twenty-first century.

In establishing this historical parallel between Golden Age and contemporary Spain, Bonilla focuses especially on the violence at the core of the country's economic success and of neoliberal corporate practices. In this sense, although Moises does not exert any kind of direct, physically violent control over his "prey," even the metaphors that he and his boss at Club Olimpo, La Doctora, deploy of "hunter" and "prey" betray the underlying symbolic and psychic violence that lurks at the core of his occupation.44 Although not a typical street-pimp, he is the recruiter who cons immigrants into prostitution with false promises of a better life. One might argue that through his self-justification as a "life saver," Moises redefines for the neoliberal economy the job description of the pimp. Club Olimpo is a large, anonymous, multifaceted, international corporation; thus, like other multinational corporations of the globalized economy, it outsources different parts of its operation to "hunters" or "scouts" such as Moises, who locate suitable prostitutes. Bonilla exposes here the perverse logic of globalization.

The violence of Moises's occupation is unleashed on him in a brutally abject way towards the end of the novel. Obsessed with Boo's beauty, Moises convinces his boss at Club Olimpo to allow him to pay an exorbitant amount of money to have sex with Boo. La Doctora fixes a price he cannot afford but allows him to pay enough to watch Boo and Irene (another caught "prey") have sex with each other. However, Moises violates the rules of the sexual scenario by sitting on the faton where they are performing a sex act for his visual gratification. Boo—furious at having his body and personal space literally and symbolically violated by his clients—suddenly stops having sex with Irene, almost chokes Moises to death, and then brutally rapes him, leaving him half-dead with his face in the toilet. As Folkart has indicated, "this violation is reconstructed third-hand, as if the anal rape of the Spaniard by the African were too horrible for direct recall!" ("Scatological" 18). Moises deduces what must have happened by piecing it together from La Doctora's account of how she found him almost dead. Folkart convincingly argues that, although there are many disturbing instances of the abjection of immigrant bodies throughout the novel, at the end, "Moises himself
of the abused immigrants represented in the novel achieve a certain measure of revenge on Moisés. This subversive representation of the clandestine immigrant as taking revenge on his abuser—an unusual plot twist in Spanish novels on the topic—is foreclosed at the end of the novel. Bonilla grants his narrator, Moisés, power over Boo and Irene in his capacity to “save their lives,” at least according to Moisés’s condemning, colonizing view of what it means for an immigrant to be saved. After Moisés has recovered from his rape and while recruiting undocumented immigrants from Africa in Pontevedunta, he is confronted again by Boo and Irene (now pregnant), who have tried to return to Spain after having been deported to their countries of origin after their attack on Moisés. The latter saves them by allowing both to remain safely in Spain (236–7; 236–7). Although the reader never learns their fate, we understand that Moisés’s last gesture of salvation towards them is, in fact, an act of self-salvation that leads him to declare: “It’s time. I’m quitting. I’m not going to save any more lives” (257).48 Moisés’s surprising change in behavior coincides with his recognition that he was a canalla after all—a reversal of his own peculiar ethical credo that could be read as a foreclosure of any disruptive, antisocial force in the novel, but also as a moralistic intervention on the part of the implied author. Bonilla seems to want to “save” and recuperate for contemporary notions of morality his own amoral protagonist. In the process, he uses the trite plot contrivance that makes the “bad queer” (Moisés) the culprit of his own fall and, at the same time, the figure that enables the deserving heterosexual couple to continue with their happy lives. In this case, although the novel leaves their future open, it suggests that at least they and their unborn child will have the chance to survive in Spain. With this ambiguously hopeful ending (hopeful for Boo, Irene, and their child, not for Moisés), Bonilla departs from the tradition of the picaresque and also seems to abandon his overall project of political critique, as Moisés is allowed this last real act of salvation—an act that also allows him to recognize his previous moral failures: “[a]proving of the insult, happy to be called a scumbag, I said: Moisés Froissard Calderón, La Florida 15, apartment 3B, canalla. I almost felt like having business cards printed up with the information” (Bonilla, The Nubian Prince 258).49

47 Nevertheless, a few other immigrant characters do not get to enact revenge on him. This is the case of Emilio, a young Argentinean with whom Moisés manages to have his first homosexual encounter by taking advantage of Emilio’s impoverishment during the economically dismal years of el corralito. Emilio, however, is not strictly homosexual. He has a girlfriend and only prostitutes himself with men because he must. Sick of working for Club Olimpo—mostly with male clients, an important detail in the overall homophobic structure on which this novel rests—Emilio eventually commits suicide by ingesting seafood to which he is highly allergic, in a gesture that Moisés perversely reads as an act of courage and agency, but which clearly bespeaks Emilio’s desperation (266; 233–4).

48 “Ha llegado mi hora. Lo dejo. No salvaré más vidas” (290).

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has become the abjected body beyond the bounds of control, the body that leaks beyond containment and that can scarcely sustain itself with breath" (18). The heterosexist logic of the novel—a logic that merely replicates the male-authored picaresque novelistic tradition—suggests that Moisés's body becomes a feminized body, a feminization that had already been suggested by the relation between Moisés's and his mother's "little thing." Anne J. Cruz has argued in her recent analysis of the early modern Spanish picaresque novel's gender-inflected plot that it "brings to the fore the misogynist attitudes expressed toward women in early modern Spain" ("Figuring Gender" 9). Likewise, Bonilla's heterosexist-inflected plot and his homage to the picaresque genre reaffirm sexism, homophobia, and racism. Consider for example the novel's representations of La Doctora as a masculinized, castrioting, phallic woman (Villamandos 201); Moisés as an effete scumbag; Moisés's depressive and suicidal mother as the root of all his problems; and the racialized immigrant bodies of sex workers as objectified desirable bodies. As Folkart concludes, despite what might be perceived as the immigrant asserting personal agency and taking revenge on the Spaniard, the novel, "seems to reproduce and reinforce the very abjectification of African immigrants and homosexual desire that it otherwise problematizes" (15). As Folkart attests, the implicit homophobia of the plot is troubling. The novel problematically suggests that Moisés's amoral character stems from his incapacity to come out as a gay individual. However, interpreted within the long-standing literary tradition of the picaresque, the novel critiques contemporary Spain's participation in globalization and neoliberalism, which, by aggressively promoting the pursuit of profit and the marketing of sex, is complicit in the disturbing forms of cynical amorality, abuse, and violence central to the plot. Like other neopicaros, Moisés's goals in life are to make a lot of money fast (by exploiting cheap labor in this case, as befits our contemporary global, interconnected economies); to satisfy his basest desires; and to disrupt socially accepted good behavior: "Since I was a child, I've been goaded by an insatiable curiosity, particularly whenever I've felt compelled to commit a forbidden or improper action" (215).

Because the picaresque is, above all, an antisocial figure, Moisés may also be read in contemporary queer academic terms as a failed instance of Lee Edelman's "anti-social queer" or "sinthomosexual." Even without recourse to contemporary queer theory, however, one can make a similar argument by focusing on the inherent narratological tension at the core of the picaresque. The tension between the narrative voice and the emerging judgments of the implied author guarantees moral ambivalence and ethical contradictions in this work. In this regard, most of the abused immigrants represented in the novel achieve a certain measure of revenge on Moisés. This subversive representation of the clandestine immigrant as taking revenge on his abuser—an unusual plot twist in Spanish novels on the topic—is foreclosed at the end of the novel. Bonilla grants his narrator, Moisés, power over Boo and Irene in his capacity to "save their lives," at least according to Moisés's condescending, colonizing view of what it means for an immigrant to be saved. After Moisés has recovered from his rape and while recruiting undocumented immigrants from Africa in Fuenteventura, he is confronted again by Boo and Irene (now pregnant), who have tried to return to Spain after having been deported to their countries of origin after their attack on Moisés. The latter saves them by allowing both to remain safely in Spain (286–7; 256–7). Although the reader never learns their fate, we understand that Moisés's last gesture of salvation towards them is, in fact, an act of self-salvation that leads him to declare: "It's time. I'm quitting. I'm not going to save any more lives" (257). Moisés's surprising change in behavior coincides with his recognition that he was a canalla after all—a reversal of his own peculiar ethical credo that could be read as a foreclosure of any disruptive, antisocial force in the novel, but also as a moralistic intervention on the part of the implied author. Bonilla seems to want to "save" and recuperate for contemporary notions of morality his own amoral protagonist. In the process, he uses the trite plot contrivance that makes the "bad queer" (Moisés) the culprit of his own fall and, at the same time, the figure that enables the deserving heterosexual couple to continue with their happy lives. In this case, although the novel leaves their future open, it suggests that at least they and their unborn child will have the chance to survive in Spain. With this ambiguously hopeful ending (hopeful for Boo, Irene, and their child, not for Moisés), Bonilla departs from the tradition of the picaresque and also seems to abandon his overall project of political critique, as Moisés is allowed this last real act of salvation—an act that also allows him to recognize his previous moral failures: "[a]pproving of the insult, happy to be called a scumbag, I said: Moisés Froissard Calderón, La Florida 15, apartment 3B, canalla. I almost felt like having business cards printed up with the information" (Bonilla, The Nubian Prince 258).

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The implied author’s critique extends to contemporary Spain which, the novel seems to suggest, has won the battle to join the global economy by using as its shield the bodies (literal and figurative) of immigrants from the global South. Moisés explains a dream in which

I was in a trench, an enemy was coming to kill me, and I crawled under the lifeless bodies of my fallen comrades; I hid beneath them like a soldier taking cover under a friend’s corpse. That’s how I’d be saving my own life, hiding beneath all those bodies who now seemed to want to escape from my photo album [of the immigrants he scouted]—more of a pantheon than ever—and stand before me, dead, so I could see myself hiding beneath them, using their corpses to defend myself against an invisible enemy I could not withstand. (219)59

The extended metaphor of prostitution in the book—which alludes to Spain’s own prostitution, its abandonment of any sense of solidarity with the “wretched of the earth” (in Fanon’s famous coinage) in exchange for economic gain—is somewhat suggested in Moisés’s final self-justification that he “found” these rough diamonds, and he polished them, thus turning them into valuable commodities to be marketed and sold:51

No tenia fuerzas para convencerme de lo contrario, para decírmelo nuevo lo que tantas veces me había dicho para seguir adelante, les salvo la vida, les ofrecí algo mejor de lo que tienen, eran diamantes perdidos en una ciénaga y yo los extrajo, los limpié para ponerlos en un escaparate donde brillaran, les coloqué la etiqueta con un precio que borde alguna relación a su verdad de costo. (218-19)52

50 estaba yo en una trinchera y se acercaba un enemigo, un enemigo que venía a matarme, y entonces yo me cubría con los cuerpos sin vida de los compañeros caídos, me escondía debajo de ellos, como el soldado que se cubre con el cadáver del enemigo. Así había ido salvando mi vida yo, cubriéndome con todos aquellos cuerpos que ahora parecían querer salir de mi foto album, más panteón que nunca, y presentármeme en vida, para que yo me viera oculto bajo ellos, defendiéndome gracias a sus cadáveres de un enemigo invisible al que no era capaz de arrostrar. (249)

51 Villamandos studies how, “Within a discourse that reifies and commodifies the immigrant body, the factor of difference and otherness becomes fundamental. [...] But, without a doubt, where that economy of difference is better located is in the almost desperate search of the ‘Nubian prince’” (202). For Leone, “This comparison of people to diamonds highlights an exploitative exchange in which individuals consume a product that is often trafficked and that funds civil wars in Africa, human rights abuses, and worker exploitation. Proposing that Nadim might replicate a diamond suggests, too, a commodity paradigm, for the original no longer figures in the exchange” (152).

52 No tenía fuerzas para convencerme de lo contrario, para decírmela de nuevo lo que tantas veces me había dicho para seguir adelante, les salvo la vida, les ofrecí algo mejor de lo que tienen, eran diamantes perdidos en una ciénaga y yo los extrajo, los limpié para ponerlos en un escaparate donde brillaran, les coloqué la etiqueta con un precio adecuado a su valor. (249)

That Bonilla, a well-meaning, progressive journalist and fiction writer, cannot envision in Los principes nubios a national project for contemporary Spain that is both solidary with irregular immigrants and solidary with its LGBTQ population is symptomatic of many shortcomings in Spain’s current national project. Such a cultural project of intersectional inclusion would move beyond seeing both clandestine migrants and queers as “disenfranchised foreigners . . . spectral humans, deprived of ontological weight and failing the tests of social intelligibility required for minimal recognition,” as Judith Butler explains in another context (Butler and Spivak 15).

By highlighting Los principes nubios’s debt to the Spanish picaresque literary tradition (especially in regards to its complex narratological structure and heterosexist ideology) and by identifying in this novel a monumental “acting out” of Spanish violent racist and homophobic fantasies of anal rape, this study demonstrates that Bonilla’s novel is symptomatic of a disturbing trend in Spanish cultural products depicting irregular immigration from Africa to Spain across the Strait. Although these works offer well-meaning critiques of Spaniards’ racism towards African immigrants, they articulate those critiques in such a way as to reinscribe homophobia. Such homophobic lashing out is sometimes directed at the immigrant,53 yet in others (such as in Los principes nubios) at the abusive Spanish character. This trend exposes the ideological impasse of a “culture in shock”—a “wounded culture” that cannot reconcile its newly found first-world, neoliberal status with a responsible, democratic project of recognition both of immigrants’ and LGBTQ individuals’ rights.

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53 As is the case in Molinero’s film Salvajes (see footnote 13).


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"Perilous Stra(gh)t(s): Race, Sexuality, and Immigration in Contemporary Spain." 2013. TS.
__Alienation in the “Promised Land”: Voices of Maghrebi Women in the Theater of Antonia Bueno__

Victoria L. Ketz

Antonia Bueno Mingallón, contemporary Spanish playwright, actress, director, and producer, shifted her focus from acting to writing in 2000. Her works cover a wide variety of topics including relationships, women’s roles, sexual abuse, racism, and immigration. Lourdes Bueno Pérez believes that the playwright “fully submerges herself in history to bring life and, above all, voice to female characters who, not only in the past but even in our present, suffer injustice and discrimination by much of society” (17). In several of her plays, Bueno chooses the plight of Maghrebi women as a vehicle for her literary and societal preoccupations. These female protagonists migrate to Spain in search of a promised land for their children, yet their initial idealization of this country leads to disenchantment. This study will focus on two dramas that exemplify these trends: the one-act play *Aulisdi* (2006), in which Bueno represents a mother, Aisha, who stands over her sleeping child revealing to him her hopes, dreams, and struggles; and the twenty-five-scene play *Zahra: Favorita de Al-Andalus* (2009), in which Bueno presents two versions of the same woman born on either side of the Strait at different points in history. By exploring this trans-Mediterranean traffic, Bueno presents the ramifications of migration in contemporary society.

The use of the medium of theater to present political commentary, ideological arguments, and social ideas is not new. The Theater of Alienation, which is also called Epic Theater or Dialectical Theater, has long been engaged in this inquiry. The Theater of Alienation is derived from the work of German leftist playwright, director, and poet Bertold Brecht. Brecht’s theory on the *Fremdeffekt* or making “se sumerge de lleno en la Historia para dar vida y, sobre todo, voz a unos personajes femeninos que, no sólo en el pasado sino incluso en nuestro presente, sufran la injusticia y la discriminación de gran parte de la sociedad.” All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

1. Bueno received funding from the Comunidad de Madrid to write this dramatic work in 2001. It opened at the Festival de Otoño in Madrid the following year and was published in a book titled *Triologia de las mujeres medievales* along with two other plays, *Sanche, Reina de la Hispania,* and Raquel, *Hija de Sefard.*
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## Contents

*List of Figures*  
ix  
*Notes on Contributors*  
xi  
*Foreword: Empathy, Ambivalence, and the Movement of Critique: A Prologue by Brad Epps*  
xv  
*Acknowledgments*  
xliii  

**Introduction: Representations of Africa in Twenty-First-Century Spain: Literatures and Cultures Crossing the Strait**  
Debra Faszer-McMahon and Victoria L. Ketz  

1 Mediated Morality of Immigration: Metaphysical Detection in Marta Sanz’s *Black, black, black*  
*Shanna Lino*  

*Gema Pérez-Sánchez*  

3 Alienation in the “Promised Land”: Voices of Maghrebi Women in the Theater of Antonia Bueno  
*Victoria L. Ketz*  

4 Searching for Justice in *Return to Hansala* by Chus Gutiérrez: Cultural Encounters between Africa and Europe  
*Ana Coralán*  

5 Celebrity, Diplomacy, Documentary: Javier Bardem and *Sons of the Clouds: The Last Colony*  
*Jill Robbins*  

6 Tales of Two Shores: The Re-Establishment of Dialogue across the Strait of Gibraltar  
*Raquel Vega-Durán*  

7 Parejas Mixtas: African–Spanish Couples in Cyberspace  
*Kathleen Honora Connolly*  

8 *Oikos* and the “Other”: Humanizing the Immigrant in Donato Ndongo’s *El metro*  
*Mahan L. Ellison*
List of Figures

6.1 Logotype of Entre Dos Orillas. Source: EDO, design by Zurn Creativos, 2008. 134
6.2 Movie poster of Cuento de las dos orillas. Source: Jesús Armesto, 2006. 138