

Ecuador is Black: Afro-Ecuadorian Literary Resistance in *Drums Under My Skin*

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Introduction

In the midst of researching this project and struggling to find a visual example of historical Blackness in Ecuador, I encountered a poem that touched on the issue of anti-Blackness present in parts of Latin America. Within this poem, called “Me Gritaron Negra” (“They Shouted ‘Black’ At Me”), Afro-Peruvian activist and artist Victoria Santa Cruz remembers with anger and sorrow the constant taunting she experienced from the of five because the dark color of her skin and the kinkiness of her hair. Throughout childhood she was mocked with incessant choruses of “negra!” Although the literal meaning of this word is “black,” which can simply denote someone’s skin color, hair color, among other objects, behind the literal, this parade of “negra” was meant to shame her Blackness for its supposed lack of beauty and worth. Due to this, Santa Cruz attempted to lighten her skin and straighten her hair in order to create white and mestizo beauty standards on her own body and distance herself from her Blackness. However, by the end of the poem she found power in the word “negra,” and her own Blackness by proclaiming that she was beautiful and that her Blackness was a rhythmic gift, and through that, she rewrote the history of hate that had been forced upon her. I introduce this poem before my presentation because it illustrates not only the problem of anti-Blackness in Latin America, but also how Blackness is capable of agency in Latin America.

Importantly, through this poem, we can see how art is a transformative space for Black people. Specifically, the transformative space I analyze for my research is the novel *Bajo la piel de los tambores* or *Drums Under My Skin* by Afro-Ecuadorian writer Luz Argentina Chiriboga. Through her writing of protagonist Rebeca, a young—and using the

terminology in Ecuador—*mulata*, meaning someone who is Black and white, Argentina Chiriboga confirms that literature can be an affirming space for Black resistance against white oppression by showing Rebeca’s sexual and racial discovery of her body through her movement from Esmeraldas to Quito and back again. Writing can also be a call to memory of the body, mind or ancestral past. For Argentina Chiriboga, memory serves as a backdrop for the main character’s journey towards acceptance of her Blackness and sexual body without the need for approval from white men. Author Argentina Chiriboga herself is from Esmeraldas, a city in Ecuador that is historically and socially known as Black. Her knowledge of this space allows her to write the Esmeraldan memory of resistance into her work. She also places *lo negro*, or Blackness, within Ecuador by textually remembering Black traditions and consciousness in order to break the ideological structure of *mestizaje*. However, she is not simply making room for Blackness in Ecuador, rather, she makes it the center of everything.

Blackness in Ecuador

The memory of resistance in Esmeraldas can be tied to its beginnings as a spot of liberation for Black people. In 1553 a ship en route to Peru with twenty-three slaves anchored off the Esmeraldian Coast (Rahier 28). Later, a thunderstorm wrecked that same ship and that wreckage gave the slaves a chance to “escape to the central forested area of the province after (probably, in Rahier’s understanding) having killed the Spanish crew” (Rahier 28). From then on, on this Esmeraldian Coast, the emancipated Africans intermarried with Indigenous communities already living there and became the commanding force in the Esmerald Province (Whitten 302). Although this community of Indigenous and Black people was a great example of resistance in Ecuador, it did not

ultimately change the exclusionary nature of *mestizaje* (race mixing) and *blanqueamiento* (whitening).

Literature Review

However, even within the past and present reality of racial oppression, it is unfair to categorize Black Ecuadorian people, specifically women and girls, as always being acted upon by white and mestizo Ecuadorians. Like the Esmeraldian site in which the main text is written, Black Ecuadorian women and girls are capable of resistance. An integral part to understanding this resistance is Chandra Talpade Mohanty's work *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. In her work, she discusses "Third World Women," and the pattern of Western feminism to characterize Third World Women by their, in her words, "victim status" (Mohanty 25). Or, the idea that all Third World Women have the same experience of victimization regardless of class, sexual orientation, race or language differences (Mohanty 21). I, however, extend Mohanty's definition of "victim status" (25) to negate the idea that any form of agency is impossible under societies which repress certain identities. By looking at women and girls outside of their victim status, I do not wish to ignore how they have been systemically oppressed, however, constantly viewing these Black Ecuadorian women and girls as victims within white and mestizo understandings ignores the autonomy they can construct around their bodies, sexualities and families. This idea of always being victims is an incredibly limited way of viewing Black Ecuadorians because it constantly positions them as an object.

Analysis of *Drums Under My Skin*

Rebeca, the main character, is able to move past being an object when she returns from her Catholic girls' school in Quito, a city in Ecuador, to her hometown of Esmeraldas and begins to recognize her body as, in the words of LaManda Horton Stallings, a "site of

memory” for her Blackness. The town of Esmeraldas, as discussed earlier, is a site where liberation is present in the history, people and soil. This memory emerges in Rebeca’s body while she is on the beach watching two Black women speaking. When watching them, she envisions her grandmother who “cropped up slowly before [her]” (Argentina Chiriboga 92). Being back in Esmeraldas where not only the memory of Black liberation is present, but also the memory of her grandmother is present links Rebeca back to a distinctive, clear memory of Blackness. After physically voicing in defiance that “I’m her granddaughter,” she notices that “My roots, which I had wrongfully wanted to hide, were no longer painful to me” (Argentina Chiriboga 92). She then recognizes the memory of her grandmother and Blackness within her body by hearing “the drums beating under my skin” (Argentina Chiriboga 92). Although Rebeca’s body has always been a memory of Blackness, when she proclaims that fact, she locks the memory into being for herself.

While there is magic in seeing a Black girl recognize and take pride in her Blackness, there are limitations to Argentina Chiriboga’s work. Specifically, with her brief but unjust portrayal of a student named Vicenta. A brief moment of consensual intimacy between Rebeca and Vicenta, comes to an abrupt end when during their interaction Rebeca “discovers” Vicenta’s penis. After this scene, Vicenta is written as a violent, haunting figure who endangers Rebeca and the rest of the cisgender women at the Catholic school they both attend. One of the many issues with the author’s reading of bodies that aren’t cisgender is that there is no room for exploration of the body that has been given to Rebeca throughout the novel. Therefore, in Argentina Chiriboga’s understanding, Black queer and non-cisgender Ecuadorian bodies are not at all invited to engage in liberation of the Black body.

Therefore, although her work is a wonderful and a defiant act against racism in Ecuador, it is simply a start. Although through her writing of Rebeca we are able to see how Blackness in Ecuador is not always confined under the narrative of being a victim to racism and exclusionary Ecuadorian *mestizaje*, however, it is not all encompassing. By understanding how various marginalized Black Ecuadorian identities move throughout oppressive spaces, a deeper, complete appreciation of the beauty in embracing all forms of Blackness can truly disrupt racist sexism in Ecuador.