

Of Cocks and Boxers: [Black] Masculinity and National Belonging in Manuel Zapata Olivella's *Chambacú, corral de negros*¹

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Soy un gallo de pelea
y no me dejo arrumar.
Tengo la casta
y no me voy a malpelear.
...pico y espuela les doy.
Pa ' que respeten
gallo de pelea soy.

Pico y espuela, Luis Towers "El Rasta."

A uno como negro no le queda otra
alternativa que el ring y la fama, marica,
porque las demás profesiones, Ud. lo sabe
viejo Davidson, son oficio pa' blanco.

El Flecha, David Sanchez Juliao

Extensive critical work on nation building and nationalism has established a consensus in Latin America, affirms Rebecca Biron, that "cod[es] the active citizen as male ... operating within a fundamentally masculinist framework"(1). This analysis is grounded on the importance of including gender in the national equation. Later, class and race became recognized as equally important constitutive elements of national phenomena.² In light of the new plurinational paradigm brought forth by the new Constitution of 1993, the critical discursive space in Colombia reflects the country's new reality through the proliferation of necessary discussions on cultural and racial identity.³ The new Colombian constitution recognizes the rights of Afrodescendants and Indigenous peoples to claim and preserve their cultural and linguistic identity. Issues of marginality and lack of economic and political participation among said groups have also been acknowledged as obstacles that prevent inclusion in the national body. A more incisive consideration of gender as it intersects with race and national belonging still requires more attention. This need is particularly pressing in the Northern coast of Colombia where the national epic has been synonymous historically with the saga of the white and *blanqueada* upper class intelligentsia. As a result, the powerful contributions of Afro groups and their struggle to claim their rightful place at the national level have been dismissed. While the Pacific coast has generated considerable discussions on black women and their political activism,⁴ conversations on blackness on the Northern coast continue to address race from a general perspective and with a focus on racial taxonomies and social, economic and political participation, omitting the centrality of gender and the need to contextualize and pluralize racism.⁵

It is important, therefore, to deconstruct the ideal male [white] citizen—or *mestizo* in the case of Colombia and Latin America—to examine representations of masculinity in relation to race and nationality.

In this study, I examine the relationship between black masculinity and national belonging in the Northern coast of Colombia, as depicted in Manuel Zapata Olivella's novel *Chambacú, corral de negros*.⁶ The text clearly portrays subjects whose lives are marked by race and who exhibit relationships with nationality and gender that pose a series of important questions. In addition, looking at blackness and gender in relation to national belonging in *Chambacú* provides an opportunity to explore the currency of Zapata Olivella's agenda of representation to this very day. Definitions of self in the novel are determined, to a great extent, by work, the type of which is, in turn, related to traditionally established gender categories. Thus, I concentrate my analysis on the novel's treatment of cockfighting and boxing, two central occupations performed by *chambaculero* men, and two of the very few careers available to them for their subsistence. By probing the elements offered in *Chambacú* when blackness and masculinity intersect, the rationale behind the models of black males that the text projects comes alive. Ideally, this analysis aims to contribute to transcend the very artificial racialized gender categories exhibited in the novel to raise questions about their own legitimacy, and to envision the possibility of attaining what Paul Gilroy defines as a non-Spartan male subjectivity that can subvert the limited design of patriarchal maleness in the context of the modern nation (*Small Acts* 8).

Masculinity and Blackness

To begin, it is important to address a poignant question pertinent to Euro-North American approaches to studies of gender and sexuality: Why focus on masculinity at a time when so much effort is directed to the de-essentialization of traditionally defined gender categories and to destabilizing heterosexual patriarchal national imaginaries? Can gender function as a productive category of analysis that can allow us to examine and question the very principles that fix it? Can we dismiss binary gender categories in societies where heterosexuality and the model of the nuclear family are invested with legality, and the lives of children, the elderly, and the extended family still depend on the functionality of these models in terms of access to jobs, education and social inclusion? I believe that we cannot. At the same time, I argue for not losing sight of the possibility of debunking such limiting models, especially when women in marginal groups continue to prove their ability to mobilize more resources for survival. The ideal strategy, then, involves moving critically *to* and *from*, in a pendulum type of movement that can allow all- visionary feminists as defined by bell hooks, cultural workers, political activists and even mainstream thinkers- to articulate pluralistic concepts that will help us deconstruct the very limited spectrum of subjective identities offered within a linear patriarchal national cosmogony. Both, traditional visions of gender and new and alternative modes of self-definition, should be included to analyze what is, to then move towards what we individually need and desire, and what the national collectivity must accommodate to coexist somewhat harmoniously.

The term masculinity then begs the question already posed and answered by scholars of all walks of disciplines: What is masculinity? Taking into account the conclusion of a good number of scholars, Rebecca Biron states that

masculinity is something individuals or entire cultures have. Having it somehow explains what one does. When masculinity is defined as a set of prescribed social roles or as a power structure, it always functions as an ambiguous standard against which to measure people and their actions... If males possess masculinity inherently, through having a penis or through overdetermined hormonal and psychological structures, then the fact that they must also earn it through prescribed behaviors and rituals or initiation poses a serious contradiction. Is it a birthright, or is it an elusive sign of status that men are obligated to obtain in order to bear meaning in the social order? (10-11)

Biron's affirmation is not intended to privilege one position over the other; that is, biological arguments versus manifestations of gender through performance. Her own analysis leans towards the psychoanalytical dimensions of gender studies that recognize masculinity as a process of

negotiation between master and secondary signifiers (14). What is perceived in the realm of the "real" would be the outcome of said negotiations, that is its projections. It could be argued that masculinity is both: a self-appropriated birth-right legitimized by the Symbolic Order, and the result of a social obligation to perform the part, lest the individual does not care to invoke self-deprecation. Having at stake inclusion or exclusion from the national community, individuals are under duress to prove their capacity to be valuable and reliable citizens. If we return to the premise of citizen = male subject, men find themselves under the gun, another very phallic symbol. This may imply that women must find their place in the nation in the spaces devoid of the masculine. However, a lot has happened in Latin America to subvert this axiom, thankfully, mostly through upper and middle class women participation in the public arena, but with an increasing presence of women from marginalized groups. In Colombia this recent increase in the number of women in public roles also applies to Afrodescendant women, more so than indigenous women. Nonetheless, the ideal national subject remains male, rich and white, or mestizo, if diversity is required.

Within the previous scenario, and as a site of oppression and a historically marked sign, black masculinity must remain a functional category of analysis, for countless male Afrodescendants still face marginalization and persecution due to their ethnic identity, and especially because their realities spill over to their partners, children and communities. In the midst of an urban regional and national paradigm that continues to privilege an axiom of whiteness and *blanqueamiento* that imbricates with class, the majority of Afrodescendants in Colombia occupy a subjugated space.⁷ Paul Gilroy discusses a similar equation in Great Britain and in the Western continuum in general, and affirms that "blacks enjoy a subordinate position in the dualistic system that reproduces the dominance of bonded whiteness, masculinity, and rationality" (*The Black Atlantic* 45-46). In the Northern coast of Colombia, inserting masculinity into the realm of blackness denounces the elements that continue to ensure the subordination of Afrodescendants to predominant notions of general inferiority. Dualistic gender categories can, then, be examined from a feminist perspective to breakdown their multiple meanings. This is particularly important, states Mary Hawkesworth, for women/people of color and lesbian feminists

who have suggested that the 'multiple jeopardy' characteristic of their lives raises serious questions about the validity of gender generalizations. If gender is always mediated by race, class, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation, then an analytical framework that isolates gender or construes gender in terms of an 'additive model' is seriously flawed and may serve only to mask the numerous privileges of white, middle class feminists who have the luxury of experiencing only one mode of oppression. (147)

In the Northern coast of Colombia, consequently, and in the case of male Afrodescendants, it is important to inscribe the very particular aspects that determine their quality of life and the possibilities for self-empowerment available to them to attain a better quality of life.

Manuel Zapata Olivella's novel, *Chambacú, corral de negros* inscribes race onto the sign of costeño,⁸ an individual from the Northern coast, to deconstruct this category of self, and to question dominant discourses that erase issues of racial identity and national belonging. In the 1960s, Zapata Olivella's agenda becomes explicit through this social realist novel, published initially in 1963 and later again in 1967, the same year of publication of Gabriel García Márquez' *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. Set on the late 50s, *Chambacú* inserts itself in the problematic history of the real space of Chambacú, a black urban settlement that existed since the XVIII century through the late 1980s outside the walls of the Old City of Cartagena.⁹ Published at the height of the magic-realist movement, *Chambacú* serves as a starting point in the process of examining the representation and articulation of a black male (national) subject. Much like the current moment in Colombian history when there is an immense preoccupation for projecting a new plurinational image, the 50s, the time of Zapata Olivella's novel, unveils the central government's intent to modernize, pacify and reinvent the national realm to project itself onto the international and the then nascent global stage.

The central story of *Chambacú* is the tale of Cotena's family, a matriarchal group, completely marginalized economically and with no possibilities of changing its destiny. From this private circle and space, the reader enters the public and collective, urban, regional and national spaces. The family's daily events and the lives of each of the novel's typological characters imbricate with community events and national, and even transnational crisis, as is the case with the Korean War. In this text, Zapata Olivella offers an array of black male characters articulated within the possibilities allowed amidst marginality, compartmentalization and discrimination.

Cotena's sons form an array of male models: Máximo is a self-taught intellectual and political leader who pushes the *chambaculeros* to resist eviction from their homes and total eradication from their settlement. José Raquel, whose sexual abilities are questionable, is a drug addict, a professional smuggler, and a police informant who gains status in the community by "possessing" a white European wife, Inge. He brings her to *Chambacú* as "booty," along with a new red motorcycle, when he returns from the Korean War, in which he participates voluntarily, while others fight their forced recruitment. "Kid Medialuna" and Crispulo, Cotena's younger sons, perform the two professions that occupy this study: boxing and cockfighting, respectively, both traditional jobs for many *chambaculeros* who dream of getting out of *Chambacú*. Zapata Olivella further establishes the limited scheme of possibilities for survival available to successive generations of black males

in *Chambacú* through the character of Dominguito, Clotilde's son. Clotilde is Cotena's only daughter. She is a domestic servant and single mother who is "impregnated" by "el blanco Emiliani" (Zapata Olivella 14).

Fighting Cocks and (Black) Men

The scene of cockfighting emerges in the novel as a site in which a good number of elements converge to analyze representations of black masculinity. Cockfighting unveils black masculinity in this text as it is contained within an urban and national space that struggles to achieve coherence and stability. In a Foucaultian paradigm that renders the nuclear family, heterosexuality and patriarchy as necessary elements to attain a utopian homogeneous, pacified and modern consolidated national space, cockfighting offers infinite possibilities of scrutiny to examine masculine rituals and the construction of maleness. Among *chambaculeros*, cockfighting is viewed as an "inherited" occupation passed down from one generation of black males to the next, and is part of a rite that articulates male subjectivity in the novel.

For centuries,¹⁰ cockfighting has been a significant cultural and economic practice in communities around the world, in many of which still is, even illegally. In Latin America, cockfighting is widely practiced and, according to Alan Dundes, "in those areas of the world where cockfighting thrives, it is virtually the national (male) pastime" (vii).¹¹ Even though cockfighting has been thoroughly studied, Dundes' anthology *The Cockfight: A Casestudy* is perhaps one of the most complete of recently published works on the subject. The text includes excerpts of novels, essays on legal issues surrounding cockfighting, and anthropological studies. Geographically, Dundes' text covers work on cockfighting representative of places from different areas of the world, using studies from Brazil, Venezuela and Puerto Rico to illustrate this practice in Latin America. A more substantial comparative study of representations of cockfighting in Latin American literature is needed; a conversation that this study aims to begin. Aside from Manuel Zapata Olivella, Juan Rulfo and Gabriel García Márquez offer two of the clearest inclusions of cockfighting in literary texts and film.¹²

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz's pioneer ethnographic study about cockfighting in Bali is still one of the most important sources of information on the economic and social function of cockfighting. His arguments are duly contested by Dundes, for the latter feels that Geertz focuses more on the social and economic dimensions of cockfighting, and leaves its *unconscious* charge largely unexplained. Indeed, Geertz's ethnographic study of cockfighting in Bali describes the complex betting system that rules the cockfighting ring, and how it maps the social and economic coordinates of rival cock owners and spectators (425-432). Geertz's observations are still pertinent and transcend the merely quantitative

dimension he addresses. Julie Sheridan states that Geertz's analysis "provides a 'metasocial commentary,'" (497), a helpful consideration in relation to *Chambacú*. Indeed, Geertz's interpretations surrounding cockfighting emphasize key elements in Balinese culture, regarding Balinese people's views on animals and how the Balinese relate to them.

The relationship of Balinese people with animals is governed by a cosmogony that perceives animalism "as the direct inversion, aesthetically, morally, and metaphysically, of human status" (419). According to Geertz, babies are not permitted to crawl for fear of displaying animalistic behavior (420). Conversely, Geertz perceives a clear identification between Balinese men and fighting cocks. It is important to spell out how this identification occurs to later contrast Geertz's conclusions with the dynamics of the relationship between cockfighters and their animals in Zapata Olivella's novel. Among Balinese people, Geertz states, views on animalism derive from believing that the human body is "a set of separately animated parts" (417). This belief helps Balinese men not to identify themselves with fighting cocks for fear of adopting animalistic behavior. Consequently, Geertz determines that for the Balinese, "cocks are viewed as detachable, self-operating penises, ambulant genitals with a life of their own" (417). Granted, there is no access, states Geertz, to the unconscious material that could corroborate Balinese men's connection to their fighting cocks, an aspect of Geertz's work that Dundes finds lacking. However, their behavior evidences what could be interpreted as a narcissistic, sexual-like, pleasure experienced by Balinese men when

grooming them [the roosters] feeding them, discussing them, trying them out against one another, or just gazing at them with a mixture of rapt admiration and dreamy self-absorption. Whenever you see a group of Balinese men squatting idly in the council shed... half or more of them will have a rooster in their hands, bouncing gently up and down to strengthen its legs, ruffling its feathers with abstract sensuality, pushing in and out against a neighbor's rooster to rouse its spirit. (418-419)

These phallogocentric and highly homoerotic images reveal a performance of masculinity by proxy, meant to reassert male power publicly. Understandably, a great deal of pleasure could be obtained when "ruffling" cocks' feathers and watching cocks fight, for the cockfight itself, says Dundes, "a symbolic, public masturbatory, phallic duel" (275), defining "phallus as gallus" and aiming to correct Geertz's reluctance to name the act. Foremost, the cockfight is an instance of folklore, states Dundes, and its function is "to allow individuals to do or say things they could not otherwise do or say... It is in the final analysis precisely the unconscious content of folklore (as fantasy) which allows it to function as it does, that is, as a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of taboo thoughts and acts" (241-242). As a source of

gratification, the cockfight can be addictive, and "attending cockfights is a harder habit to kick than smoking or heavy drinking," says Marko Maunula (81).

Geertz's analysis of Balinese beliefs regarding animals, as well as his suggestions on the sexual symbolism contained in the cockfight are helpful when examining cockfighting in *Chambacú*. And so are Dundes' very direct conclusions on the function of the cockfight as a manifestation of the unconscious desire to masturbate. Some, if not all, of the same elements contained in the performance Geertz describes in Bali are at play in Zapata Olivella's novel, since, much as in Bali, in *Chambacú*, "it is only apparently cocks that are fighting. Actually, it is men" (417). And fighting cocks and being a cocker are more direct ways to retain a manhood under attack, in the case of chambaculero men, within an exclusionary national agenda that leaves them out of the national home.

Furthermore, they are men who physically need to eat and feed their families. *Chambacú* offers enough support to confirm that, for Crispulo, his cocks are a vehicle to earn much needed money. "En las tardes afortunadas, con la totalidad de sus gallos victoriosos, traía un poco de alegría a su casa. La madre, con desgano recibía el dinero que le entregaba" (Zapata Olivella 24), that could help feed the family.

But the elements involved in the relationship between men and cocks in *Chambacú* disclose a very familial connection, a dimension explored neither by Geertz nor by Dundes.¹³ The care, attention and dedication that Crispulo manifests towards his animals, outline a relationship that bypasses the economic aspect. Upon each return to Cotena's house, Crispulo cares for his cocks' wounds and keeps them alive: "Los dedos [de Crispulo] abrían sus párpados hinchados. Taponaba ríeuevamente sus heridas con yodo" (36). Crispulo also protects his cocks from the hungry rats and shares his own living space and food with them, "[g]allero y animal se entendían. Aceptaban las mutilaciones como un ritual ineludible" (115). An attractive angle of analysis can indeed simply define this passage as a narcissistic act that equates Crispulo's care for his cocks as a masturbatory act, according to Dundes, for his own mother sees cockfighting as a vice and his sister Clotilde fears it as a "maldita pasión" (107). Crispulo's behavior towards his cocks is in actuality as much a strategy to ensure their survival and as an act of self-preservation. Like his cocks, Crispulo is engaged in a daily struggle for economic and personal survival to remain alive. He is faced with constant persecution by the police, and must endure the dangers of living in unsanitary conditions, in which mosquitoes, rats and "hambre" (74) are constant companions. At the gallera, Crispulo pushes his cocks to win and hopes for prize money that can contribute to his family's subsistence.

Crispulo's battle for survival is ultimately lost, for his cocks are blind and too old to win their matches.¹⁴ Under constant threat of being attacked by rats in Crispulo's house, the cocks have to sleep and stay in a sack since "habían

intentado las ratas comerse un gallo herido” (72), circumstances that diminish the chances of keeping them healthy and strong enough to fight. Destined to fail in the pit, Crispulo’s best cocks, “el gallino” and “el camagüey,” “se encalambra[ron]” (73), freeze up before their enemies’ attacks. Their death means for Crispulo the loss of every hope to earn some money, since they were his best cocks. The cocks’ failure in the pit, translates for Crispulo into a failure of his own with ample repercussions. Crispulo’s risky occupation becomes a failed project of affirmation of his own masculinity, questioning any possibility of attaining the status of the ideal productive *chambaculero* masculinity. His brothers are in an equal and total economic rut: Máximo is imprisoned, and “Medialuna” is injured. Only José Raquel gains financial stability by joining the ranks of the same police that persecute them.

The inefficacy of Crispulo’s fighting cocks symbolizes *chambaculero* masculinity as the locus of an inept subjectivity unable to produce money, safety, children- as is the case with José Raquel, or political leadership, in the case of Máximo.¹⁵ This general male ineptitude also questions the legitimacy of the status of *chambaculero* men as Colombian citizens, taking into account what Paul Gilroy defines as “the necessary relationship between nationality, citizenship, and masculinity” (*The Black Atlantic* 25). This equation establishes that “the integrity of the race [read as the integrity of the black *chambaculero* community] is primarily the integrity of its male heads of household and secondarily the integrity of the families over which they preside” (25). Constituted predominantly by matriarchal units and populated by men who are unable to be productive enough to provide for their family or their community and guarantee their safety, the novel reveals this failure as a direct result of the conditions in which *chambaculero* men are forced to exist because of their racial identity. Taken as a paradigm of black masculinity as it can be represented in the 1950s in the Northern coast, Zapata Olivella offers a bleak picture that highlights a subjugated existence with few hopes of subversion.

Máximo, *Chambacú*’s organic intellectual, condemns the violent compartmentalization and marginalization inflicted upon *chambaculeros*, identifies these factors as a result of their African heritage, and situates them in the locus of class:

Solo que a los pobres nos es imposible mantenernos unidos. Es demasiado aspirar a tener una familia. Si apenas nos miran como gentes... somos unos descendientes de esclavos. Yo soy el primero en toda mi generación que ha aprendido a leer. Solo nos dejan el derecho de tener hijos como a las bestias, pero nada más. Ni casa, ni escuela, ni trabajo. Estamos condenados a desperarnos, a no saber nunca donde moriremos. Esta tierra que pisamos no es nuestra. Mañana nos echarán de aquí aunque todos sepan que la hemos calzado con sudor y mangle. (97-98)

Chambaculero men, marginal subjects without juridical representation or recognition, are seen as a threat to the process of nation consolidation in view of their inassimilable status and bouts of resistance. Consequently, they are punished for it. And, what better punishment than feminizing them?

The failure of Crispulo’s cocks to respond to the attacks of their rivals mirrors Crispulo’s own powerlessness before the challenges he faces daily, and that he struggles not to vow to. Crispulo’s nephew, Dominguito, who becomes Crispulo’s apprentice in this ritual of manhood, cannot avoid a brush with death, when he is wounded by his cock’s poisoned spur, and faces the possible loss of one of his legs or death. Dominguito’s experience also projects the inherent fragility of the rituals that are supposed to guarantee induction into a continuum of masculinity.

Boxing: The “Real” Fight for Survival

The function of cockfighting in the novel and its interpretive potential regarding representations of masculinity remains highly symbolic, one because linguistic innuendos do most of the work, particularly in English, and two because trained roosters do the fighting. Boxing, on the other hand, is a form of “real fighting” that involves men and engages their bodies. For black boxers, the scene of boxing lends itself to examine the performance of masculinity marked by ethnicity. Much like cockfighting, in its most basic terms, pugilism is projected in the novel as a means to earn money to acquire food. As an occupation central to the economic base of the novel’s space,¹⁶ boxing is further underlined as a black man’s profession. As a spectacle, boxing puts on display the fighters’ marginality, the hunger they suffer, their fighting ability and ultimate impotence when faced with their failure to change their circumstances. The insuperable conditions that *chambaculero* boxers face stand in stark contrast against the stereotypical physical superiority assigned to the bodies of black boxers. In due course, the novel utilizes boxing as a way to contest the rationale for war, and questions the central government’s decision to send a battalion, composed mainly of black men from *Chambacú*, to the Korean War.¹⁷

The inclusion of boxing by Zapata Olivella in *Chambacú* is full of intent. Boxing, more so than cockfighting, has been a popular sport among Cartagena’s black poor males for decades. Pambél,¹⁸ a boxer from Palenque de San Basilio, a community of descendants of *cimarrones* located near Cartagena, placed Palenque’s and Cartagena’s name on the international boxing map. However, allusions to boxing do not abound in *costeño* literature. David Sánchez Juliao’s play *El flechas* is perhaps the best testimony of the role of boxing in the region and merits further analysis, particularly because it addresses the ideology of *machismo* and prevalent notions of masculinity in the Northern coast of Colombia. The author’s choice of a *mestizo* protagonist distances the text from the issue of ethnicity. The

abundance of writing both scholarly and in specialized sports venues in North America and Europe about boxing stands in sharp contrast against the scarcity of studies and representations of the sport in Latin America, a region that has offered so many famous boxers.¹⁹ My study aims to begin a more substantial discussion on boxing and its representations in Latin American literature and culture.

Manuel Zapata Olivella's inclusion of boxing in *Chambacú* opens the door to examine the role of the sport in the chambaculeros' fight for survival as well as the dynamics of gender performance it proposes in the space of the novel and beyond. In spite of the high risks it carries, boxing, as an occupation, is a source of subsistence for chambaculero men, who harbor aspirations of getting out of Chambacú, "tierra de muerte" (23). In reality, the potential income that boxing may provide the pugilists is but a dream, since "[l]o que pagan los promotores es tan poco que ni siquiera alcanza para curarse las heridas" (25). The boxers' physical strength is recognized in the novel, above all, and is established as a force derived from the need of chambaculeros to defend themselves. During police evictions, boxers who aspire to national and international titles, "aprend[en] a utilizar sus puños. El movimiento de cabeza, de piernas y brazos. El cuerpo ágil para esquivar los golpes y los yataganes" (24). Boxing is also a way for chambaculero men to reclaim their manhood by publicly displaying their strength, subverting in this manner the powerlessness imposed on them. The names of boxers in the novel, "Medialuna," "Kid Centeno," "Firpito Bogotano," "Cartagenita Kid," "El Zurdo," and "Charolito," evoke actual legends in costeño boxing historiography. Their bodies are offered as a sign of endurance, human suffering and pleasure, all elements that intersect at a very particular juncture and dynamic in the text.

Zapata Olivella's novel underlines a dimension of boxing mentioned in one of the most important studies on the sport, Carol Joyce Oates' *On Boxing* — hunger and Lack. Oates' definition of boxing recognizes the sport as "work" to ensure the economic survival of underprivileged boxers, in order to fulfill their basic needs. But Oates also sees boxing as a metaphor for the resentment and alienation felt by boxers who exist at the margins of society. For Oates, "boxers as a class are angry... For the most part, they constitute the disenfranchised of our affluent [US] society, they are the sons of impoverished ghetto neighborhoods in which anger, if not fury, is appropriate" (63). As members of the underclass, says Oates, most prominent boxers in the US are black, Hispanic or Mexican— separating the two latter categories— (66). Furthermore, Oates equates the history of the black man in North America with the history of boxing/fighting, and argues that the triumph of black men in the boxing ring, in early 20th century, sparked fears of public humiliation of white men (97).²⁰ It can be said then that boxers fight for both money and historical revenge, both factors cleared represented in *Chambacú*. *Chambaculero* men are "[n]egros" (42),

hungry, and full of rage: "En el ring se despeaban. Murallas, negros. El "Zurdo" combatía a nombre de un pasado" (40). And in the name of a present, the intent on ensuring their disappearance from the national landscape becomes reason why approximately five hundred chambaculero men were sent to the Korean War forcefully.²¹

Julie Sheridan digs deeper into Oates arguments and states that the latter sees boxing as a sport that has a "unique capacity to evoke collective disempowerment even as it celebrates the physical prowess of individual men" (495). While Oates deals with the individual and collective dimension of boxing, Sheridan feels that Oates addresses the racial dimension of pugilism in scant terms (496). I disagree somewhat with Sheridan's argument, but do take note of the fact the Oates choice not to focus on race more intently is odd, given the testimony of Mohammed Ali's legacy,²² and the lives of the many other black fighters Oates discusses in her essay: Larry Holmes, Joe Louis, Sonny Liston, Harry Wils "The Black Menace," among others.

In the novel, there is no question as to the determinacy that exists between being hungry, poor and black, factors that cannot be accurately ranked nor extricated from each other. Hunger, and not only the desire for fame and money, overwhelms *chambaculero* boxers, who ultimately are vanquished by the clamor of their empty stomachs, more so than by the punches received from their rivals: "El hambre. La tempestad del estómago como si realmente se hubiese indigestado con la pesca ilusoria" (27). The fighters imagine aromas and meals impossible to attain while *chambaculero* men are on the run or in jail. Nourished by the mussels harvested from the canal contaminated with feces, boxers enter the blood-stained canvas, with the hope of making a name for themselves and earning some money to eat. Marked by the stereotype of physical might assigned to black men, "Medialuna's" strength is enough to overpower his hunger and reaffirm the black man's legendary force. "La pujanza siempre fue minada por el hambre. Ahora él lo sentía. No bastaba con ser negro. Las piernas bailaban. El cansancio. El calambre" (40). For the pugilists, triumph, either economic or physical, is elusive. The impotence of chambaculero boxers before their inability to earn enough money to feed themselves and their families is a quick reminder of the impossibility to overcome their circumstances. At the same time, however, any public visibility attained by the fighters translates into visibility for their community and for their ethnic difference, always maintaining clear in their minds, as "Medialuna" does, that "[s]i ganaba, aplausos y palabritas de satisfacción. Pero ninguno iría hasta el camerino si desfallecía" (42). Triumph for these black boxers would mean, says Victoria A. Elmwood when discussing masculinity and nationality in the Rocky films, "being able to envision himself [the boxer] as distinct from the local, marginally employed men" (55), a requirement of "the figurative implications of th[e] match up for the status of citizenship and national membership" (55). And this is a fight that *chambaculero* boxers lose by a knockout.

Hidden amidst multiple layers of meaning surrounding the scene of boxing in Zapata Olivella's novel, the sport can also be seen, according to Frank Ardolino, as a source of renewal and "as a symbol of liberation" (17). Ardolino's assessment of boxing is based on the rise of boxing in Europe and the US in early XX century and fits *Chambacú's* reality to a limited extent, but it is helpful, in so far as his analysis is contained within conditions derived by war. As a spectacle closely related to the scene of a battle, boxing comprises aggression, fight—in this case fraternal—, attack, blood and, many times, even death. Elmwood offers another possible scenario that can be applied to the cultural milieu of Zapata Olivella's novel, since she addresses the effects of the Vietnam War. Elmwood states that Rocky combines a "male masochism that both reinvigorates the American man's virility and mitigates the perceived compromise of American manhood resulting from the then-recent military withdrawal from Vietnam" (50). War times, we all know, create a delicate social balance that needs to be maintained. To preserve a status quo in peril, David Bathrick assesses, when referring to the Weimar Period in Germany in early 20th century, that boxing can offer a type of "athletic renewal, and with the help of sport... the rejuvenation of culture as a whole" (15), promoting as well a culture of physicality in which the boxer's naked body is a sign of liberation and "boxing is an attitude" (18).

In the universe of Zapata Olivella's novel, the Korean War heightens the persecution of chambaculero men and the possibility of being forcefully drafted raises the consciousness of *chambaculeros*. "Medialuna" exhibits a lucid attitude towards boxing that establishes an unambiguous distinction between what it means for him to participate in the Korean War and what it means to box:

Eso de que lo embarquen a uno para llevarlo a otras tierras a matar gente sin tener ganas de pelear. ¿A son de qué? Otra cosa es el boxeo. Se lucha por afición, por ganar un título... Alegra la victoria ante un público que aplaude y entusiasmo. Hay veces en que se mata, pero no es la intención. (24-25)

For "Medialuna," the pain and the potential death one can face on the platform are invested with meaning and purpose, and can be elements of self-definition and athletic capability. The risks taken while boxing are also worthwhile, for the act of boxing gratifies the desire of the boxer's community for recognition and validation. Even while unattainable, boxers not only fight to motivate personal aspirations, but also to achieve for their community and to represent their collectivity. The spectators' screams, "¡Chambacú! — ¡Arriba Chambacú! (40), urge the pugilists to fight "por el título nacional" (42), lend visibility to their place of origin.

Alternatively, war is a vehicle to rid *Chambacú* of its men and the threat they represent to ongoing plans for urban

development in Cartagena. A "menless" *Chambacú* is portrayed as a vulnerable and conquerable space, easier to eradicate, as it was: "*Chambacú sin sus hombres*" (Zapata Olivella 23). And, as a manless-existing place, *Chambacú's* women have as their only alternative "venderse" (28), or become "prostitutes" as do the Rudesindas sisters. Circumscribed to the "corral"—the pig's pen—where they are forced to coexist with rats, dogs and other animals amidst sewer water and the residues of the city, chambaculeros become fully aware of the extent of their marginality and vulnerability. In Crispulo's words: "Libertad. Patria. Democracia. Son [v]ainas que nunca hemos conocido... Para mí no hay sino *Chambacú*. Ni siquiera Cartagena" (37).

The dramatic portrayal of their existence in the text conveys how chambaculero boxers' feat in the ring "mirrors life" (Max Schmeling cited in Ardolino 19). Referring to various contemporary boxing figures, Ardolino emphasizes commonly held views about the sport in postwar Europe. The artist Fritz Kortner commented to Max Schmeling, a prominent boxer of the 1920s, says Ardolino, that boxing "is not just theatre... it is really life and death. Your blood is not the product of make-up... boxing is not a sport! It is the fight for life, condensed into a dozen rounds" (19). As such, boxing functions in the novel as a trope for the "real" conditions of contemporary life, ravaged by the effects of a dual war: the Korean War and the war waged upon *Chambacú* and its inhabitants. Consequently, alienation, marginality, poverty and persecution are added to the tensions created by the push for Modernity and the Colombian government's decision to participate in the Korean War.²³

Zapata Olivella's text ascertains an unmistakable difference between fighting in the ring and fighting in the battlefield. Boxers patch up and go on after fighting: "Después del combate nos abrazamos y bajamos del ring sin rencores" (Zapata Olivella 25). "Medialuna" is convinced that soldiers are not able to do the same upon exiting the battlefield, and asks: "¿Pero tú crees que se puede regresar de la guerra sin remordimiento de conciencia? Si es que el muerto es otro, se debe sentir sus pasos, sus gritos, su mueca en el momento de enterrarle la bayoneta en la barriga" (25). "Medialuna" plainly articulates the conditions that would lead him to fight outside the ring in the following:

Ese papel no lo haría yo, aunque me lo mandaran los superiores. Otra cosa sería que vinieran los soldados extranjeros a *Chambacú* a pisotear nuestras mujeres, a quemar nuestras casas y a querer convertimos en esclavos. ¡Ah! Entonces si pelearía con gusto. Mataría gente. Estaría defendiendo mi casa, mi familia. (25)

Sound ethics envelop "Medialuna's" words. For him, and for his fellow fighters, boxing operates within comprehensible boundaries of behavior, not at all figurative.

From another angle, boxing is defined in the novel as a way to challenge high (modern) culture, book-learned

white-collar skills inaccessible to *chambaculeros*,²⁴ and defiantly puts on display black men and their bodies. As indicated by Frank Andolino, these are not Greek-like, statuesque athletic bodies, similar to those of many European and North American boxers. On the contrary, they are starved, yet powerful, male bodies marked by ethnic difference and stereotypically considered physically dangerous. “The indelible marks of race” (Steinberg cited in Sheridan 499) defines *chambaculero* boxers. They become powerful, “Se hicieron poderosos” (24), while fighting the police; their strength becomes their demise, when the military apprehends the boxers to send them off to Korea. Captain Quirós commands his soldiers to capture the pugilists: “Primero los boxeadores. Son gente que saben de pelea” (42). Although “fit” enough to fight for the nation’s interest in building a strong alliance with the United States, *chambaculero* boxers do not fulfill the necessary requirements to be part of the “body” of the nation.

In conclusion, the power embodied in the figure of the black *chambaculero* boxer in Manuel Zapata Olivella’s fictional work does not translate into a powerful subject that can overturn and transcend his disadvantaged societal circumstance. “While boxing projects a culturally idealized image of powerful male embodiment, it has been argued that power within the public sphere is controlled primarily by the disembodied, ‘universal’ subject (which is implicitly white and male)” (Sheridan 503). In other words, says Sheridan, “bodily superiority is offset by social and ethnic/racial inferiority” (504). Hindered by hunger, malnutrition and victims of police brutality, *chambaculero* men experience the impossibility of self-definition in the flesh and painfully succumb to their fate. “Medialuna” ends his days “[t]rastomado de la cabeza” (106) as a result of a knockout caused by lack of strength from hunger. *Chambaculero* boxers are then physically knocked out of their fight for citizenship.

Ultimately, neither boxers nor cockers are able to attain a space within the local and national spheres, situating the *chambaculeros* as subjects beyond the prospect of inserting themselves as part of the national continuum. The novel suggests that the national interest is to erase *Chambacú* from the cartographic landscape of Cartagena in order to allow the national consolidation process of gentrification to evolve. Such a process implies the feminization *Chambacú*: to rid this political geography of its men, by forcefully recruiting and sending them off to the Korean War, an almost certain death, by incarcerating and torturing them, and by assassinating them. And no strategy, “real” or symbolic, can overpower the mechanisms and institutions at work in the novel to keep black men in their place. The result of such a nationalistic effort is to eradicate from community the masculinist tropes (boxers and “cock”-fighters) engendering a space inhabited primarily by females. Hence, this space is reconfigured into a representation of the socially engineered symbolic representation of the female: weak, vulnerable, and pillageable. This is a

powerful assertion made by a novel set in the Cartagena of the 1950s and written by an Afrodescendant author in the 1960s, when Latin American authors as a whole were faced with the pressures of a symbolic market that insisted on equating modern literary experimentation with a push for the abstract and universal disguised within a mystified local realm. Yet, *Chambacú, corral de negros* is even more significant now when new efforts to recognize the African and indigenous roots of the Colombian nation abound.

SUNY New Paltz

NOTES

1. A portion of this paper was presented at the VI International and Interdisciplinary Conference of the Afro-Latin/American Research Association ALARA 2006 August 8-12, Veracruz, Mexico. The section on cockfighting is part of Chapter I of my doctoral dissertation "Violencia, raza, mito e historia en la literatura del Caribe colombiano."
2. See Homi K. Bhabha's *Nation and Narration*, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* and *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*; Alfonso Múnera's *El fracaso de la nación* and *Fronteras imaginadas*.
3. In this essay, I deploy the term *race* to refer to ethnic difference. While I acknowledge the constructivist nature of the term as it has been historically used by the hegemonic culture throughout the Americas to other people of African heritage, I believe it is important to utilize it when speaking of discrimination to convey the powerful effect of racist and separatist ideologies. For current arguments on ethnicity and race in Colombia see Antonio Tillis' *Manuel Zapata Olivella and The Darkening of Latin American Literature*; Ligia Aldana's "Policing Culture: The Champeta Movement Under the New Colombian Constitution" and "Memorias/ritmos diaspóricos: La champeta desde donde sea;" Elisabeth Cunin's "El Caribe visto desde el interior del país: estereotipos raciales y sexuales;" Joe Streicker's "Policing boundaries: race, class, and gender in Cartagena, Colombia;" John W. Green's "Left Liberalism and Race in the Evolution of Colombian Popular National Identity;" Peter Wade's "Understanding 'Africa' and 'blackness' in Colombia: music and the politics of culture," "Working Culture: Making Cultural Identities in Cali, Colombia," "Music, blackness and national identity: three moments in Colombian history."
4. See Kiran Asher's "text in context: Afro-Colombian Women's Activism in the Pacific Lowlands of Colombia for an overview of various grassroots women organizations in the Pacific coast.
5. See Peter Wade's "Understanding 'Africa' and 'blackness' in Colombia: Music and the Politics of Culture," "Working Culture: Making Cultural Identities in Cali, Colombia," and "Music, Blackness and National Identity: Three Moments in Colombian History;" Lisa Waxer's "Salsa, Champeta, and Rap: Black Sounds and Black Identities in Afro Colombia;" Claudia Mosquera and Marion Provansal's "Construcción de la identidad caribeña popular en Cartagena de Indias, a través de la música y el baile de champeta," and Elisabeth Cunin's "El Caribe visto desde el interior del país: estereotipos raciales y sexuales."
6. All quotes and references correspond to Zapata Olivella's *Chambacú, corral de negros*, Spanish edition published by Bolsilibros Bedout in 1967. For an excellent translation of this novel see Jonathan Tittler's *Chambacú, Black Slum*.
7. When using the term "subjugated," I refer to the lack of equal access to social, economic and political rights and the status of Afrodescendants as second-rate citizens. In no way I am establishing acceptance and resignation to this status on their part which would adhere to the concept of the subaltern that circulates in postcolonial studies, for Afrodescendants have always "put up a fight" against oppression and marginality. I do however emphasize the persistent marginalization imposed upon Afrodescendants in Colombia.
8. See Antonio Tillis' *Manuel Zapata Olivella and the Darkening of Latin American Literature* for an incisive analysis of Zapata Olivella's insertion of race onto the Latin American literary production. Numerous contributions by Laurence Prescott and Marvin Lewis, pioneers in the field of Afro Latin American research and writing, have helped shape current focus on race and identity in Latin America.
9. Research conducted in the summer of 2000 in the Archivo de Cartagena de Indias housed at Palacio de la Inquisición, Cartagena, Colombia.
10. Alan Dundes' remarkable anthology *The Cockfight: A Casebook* gathers a substantial number of essays, including Clifford Geertz pioneering work on cockfighting, and begins with a piece by St. Augustine that discusses fourth century barnyard cockfights. In his anthology, Dundes offers a most complete list of works on cockfighting.
11. My grandfather, Pedro Hernández Vergara, was a cockfighter, though he did not fight nor train his own cocks. At the tender age of 10, access to the cockfighting ring in the outskirts of my native El Carmen de Bolívar, a dangerous and isolated area, meant to me entrance into a forbidden male world that I could not quite comprehend. I was given my own cock then, which must have been very good, because it was stolen shortly after his first fight from my grandparents' backyard, right outside my bedroom window. I am only now deconstructing the

meanings contained in this experience and, although I do not have the guts anymore to witness a cockfight, a boxing match or a bullfight, as I was able to do with my grandfather in my teen years, I am still fascinated by the system of beliefs that sustain these practices, as well as their economic dimension.

12. In continental US, Zora Neale Hurston's account of her brief visit to the cockfighting ring in North Florida in her ethnographic studies inserts this practice in the cultural African American landscape alive and well in the twentieth century. Zora Neale Hurston also offers a rare insight into the presence of women in the space of cockfighting, but offers no further analysis of it.
13. Treatment of cockfighting has been acknowledged in Gabriel García Márquez' *El colonel no tiene quien le escriba* and Juan Rulfo's short story "El gallo de oro." Both texts underscore the significance of cockfighting as a means for economic survival while they also highlight the personal attachment owners exhibit towards their cocks, as if they were family members. It is at this juncture where more work is needed to compare the very familial connection portrayed in Rulfo's, García Márquez' and Zapata Olivella's texts, to name the ones with which I am better acquainted. Rulfo's text seems to raise more questions surrounding Dionisio's belief that his cock possesses a particular ability to give him access to power and love.
14. Máximo's reaction to Dominguito's accident denounces his own contradictions when he insists on having him taken to a hospital. Cotena, Dominguito's grandmother, decides to take him to the community's *curandero*, who is able to read the signs of a condition that is a product of a particular cultural and economic practice, in spite of the self-legitimization of hegemonic knowledge. Dominguito survives and his leg is saved, an instance in the novel that attests to the tensions created by a desired modern condition. Dominguito's experience also projects the inherent fragility of the rituals that are supposed to guarantee induction into a continuum of masculinity. Forthcoming work of mine will examine this very complex and significant dynamics more closely.
15. Máximo's continuous attempts to organize the community against plans by the local police and political class to expel them from their homes are foiled once he is incarcerated, tortured and ultimately shot during a demonstration. Inge, José Raquel's wife, a white European woman and self-proclaimed *chambaculera*, takes up Máximo's role and is more effectively able to negotiate with the local authorities who refrain from causing her any harm. This dimension of the novel opens countless possibilities of interpretation, not fully explored in this analysis that merits attention.
16. MZO's inclusion of boxing, I believe, inscribes the historical importance of this sport in Chambacú and in El Palenque de San Basilio, the birthplace of Pambelé, among others. In his testimonio, *Chambacú, a la tiña, puño y patá*, the *chambaculero* writer, Juan Gutiérrez Magallanes, confirms the relevance of boxing in Chambacú and mentions some of the area's best known pugilists: Dinamita Pum, Pelúo Arnedo, and Juana Maza's *giant* sons, el Milagro y Andresito. Gutiérrez Magallanes states that these local athletes fought Paye Atómico, Kid Bogotá, and many others, at the Espíritu Santo Coliseum and the Theatre Circus (68-69).
17. The UN Decree dated June 27, 1950 and drafted by the UN's Security Council: 27 de junio de 1950 states: "The Security Council, HAVING DETERMINED that the armed attack upon the Republic of Korea by forces from North Korea constitutes a breach of the peace, HAVING CALLED FOR an immediate cessation of hostilities, and HAVING CALLED UPON the authorities of North Korea to withdraw forthwith their armed forces to the 38th parallel, and HAVING NOTED from the report of the United Nations Commission for Korea that the authorities in North Korea have neither ceased hostilities nor withdrawn their armed forces to the 38th parallel and that urgent military measures are required to restore international peace and security, and HAVING NOTED the appeal from the Republic of Korea to the United Nations for immediate and effective steps to secure peace and security, RECOMMENDS that the Members of the United Nations furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area" (source). As a member of the UN and due to the prominent role of the United States in the organization, Colombia sees an opportunity to fall in good terms with the US: "[e]ra posible y benéfico buscar un acercamiento con los Estados Unidos, cuya política tanto se había criticado. La apertura y las ventajas al capital foráneo eran un gaje, la participación en una guerra lejana la mejor prueba de buena voluntad" (Tirado Mejía 90-91).
18. Born in Palenque de San Basilio, Antonio Cervantes Reyes in 1945, Kid Pambelé, was the first Colombian boxer to win a world title in the light welterweight. He still lives on a farm near Palenque, continuing his fight against drug addiction and alcoholism, the legacy

of triumph and excess money. He is an icon adored by Colombians and immortalized in song, “Pambe” by Carlos Vives, and in the popular lore.

19. Other prominent Latin American fighters include Oscar De La Hoya.
20. Oates makes reference to the outcome of Jack Johnson’s triumph over Jim Jeffries “White Hope” when race riots and lynchings followed.
21. See Alberto Ruiz Novoa’s *El Batallón Colombia en Korea, 1951-1954*.
22. Muhammad Ali’s autobiography *The Greatest: My Own Story* written with Richard Durham was published in 1976 and could have helped Oates explore in more detail the challenges experienced by one of the most famous pugilists in the world as a direct result of his ethnicity. The controversy that began with Ali’s position in regards to the Vietnam War and his refusal to go to war could have lent Oates substantial material for the parallel she offers in her essay between war and boxing. A reason for the lack of extensive discussion on Ali’s boxing career maybe because “his background was not one of desperate poverty” (86), a factor, Oates indicates,
23. Julie Sheridan’s and Frank Ardolino’s articles allude to the part war plays in the scene of boxing. Interestingly enough, Sheridan’s analysis of Carol Joyce Oates’ novel *What I Lived For* highlights the experience of the protagonist, boxer, and Union City native Tim Corcoran “Corky” in the Korean War. In his examination of the life of German boxer Max Schmeling and the geopolitical dynamics of postwar Europe and the US in early twentieth century, Frank Ardolino appraises how sports, and boxing in particular, were seen as instrumental in “the rejuvenation of culture as a whole” (15). *Chambacú* delineates the connection between pugilism and war more directly. It would be worthwhile to pursue this correlation further, across geographical borders, as Ardolino does, to emphasize its relevance in the contemporary global stage.
24. Frank Ardolino points to Bertold Brecht’s consideration “of boxing and mass culture as powerful metaphorical antidotes to the effect modernism” (20) was inflicting upon artists of the time.

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