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Mestizaje/Hybridity (Mesti-bridity) as Struggle, Contest and Subversion in *Plácido* (1982) by Gerardo Fulleda León

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The major objective of this paper is to investigate the extent to which the author, Gerardo Fulleda León, problematises the concept of hybridity in his 1989 dramatic work, *Plácido*. It aims to identify the different ways in which race, class, nationhood, and even gender, all come to figure nineteenth-century Cuba as a hybrid state enduring struggle and contest. It uses Homi K. Bhabha's understanding of hybridity as a "third space" that constantly dialogues and clashes with its constituent selves, alongside Peter Wade's similar reasoning of the term as precisely a process of "struggle and contest". It finds that Fulleda León carries out multiple acts of subversion in the text primarily through juxtaposition and irony in order to privilege an Afrocentric discourse and restore the dignity of Afro-Cuban subjectivity. It concludes that, by way of revisiting a controversial event—the killing of the mulatto poet Plácido—etched in Cuban history, the author achieves the feat of denouncing Cuba's racist past and memorialising the lifework and values of the tragic figure of Plácido.

To live in the Borderlands means you
are neither *hispana india negra española*
ni gabacha, *eres mestiza*, *mulata*, half-breed
caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;
Gloria Anzaldúa,
"To Live in the Borderlands Means You

Ser enemigo eterno del tirano,
manchar, si me es posible mis vestidos,
con su execrable sangre por mi mano.
Derramarla con golpes repetidos;
Y morir a las manos de un verdugo
Si es necesario para romper el yugo.
Plácido (**Gerardo Fulleda León, *Plácido*, 306**)

Hybridity and Mestizaje

In a broad post-colonial context, hybridity is the formation of new and mixed cultures and identities as a result of colonisation. It is to be understood more accurately in the context of the "transcultural rather than multicultural (crossing and fertilising rather than fragmented)" (Wisker), thus invoking an interrogation of the concepts of cultural difference and cultural diversity. Homi K. Bhabha, the leading post-colonial theorist of hybridity, delineates these said concepts in his essay "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences": "If cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics, or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity" (206). To this end, hybridity separates itself from both cultural difference and cultural diversity, for, while the former conveys the idea of separateness of cultures, the latter does totalisation. Hybridity emerges, then, as the equal recognition of cultures and cultural expressions regardless of perceivable difference (Wisker).

One can already see how hybridity can be a slippery or difficult term to conceptualise. Bhabha, however, has nuanced it in such a remarkable way that it has gained fundamental purpose in cultural studies since the publication of his book *Location of Culture* in 1994. For Bhabha, all cultures are essentially hybrid, as they are all constructed in a Third Space, which is a "contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation" (Bhabha 208). As soon as cultures cross over and interact, he argues, there is an "unconscious relation" that transpires between or among them that produces the

effect of mixed or opposing feelings (ibid 208). To this end, there are truly no more binaries—I/You, Us/Them, Self/Other—but a complex process of negotiation with the possibility of blooming into a Self that is neither Self nor Other but both (ibid 209).

The most important thing about Bhabha's theory of hybridity is that it subverts colonial discourse by displacing the polarities it establishes to maintain its hegemony (Gyulay). According to this reasoning, there is no sound basis on which Europe can maintain its long-touted authority on the idea of difference and superiority to her colonised peoples and places because cultural contact inevitably leads to cultural similarity—the birth of a version of that European self. And in that discriminatory practice of ridiculing the perceived Other, Europe is essentially criticising its own Self. Although such a conception of hybridity has been cautioned against because of its homogeneous approach to culture, one post-colonial theorist, Robert Young, contends that its usefulness for political resistance makes it appropriate and acceptable (qtd. in Gyulay).

Another concern with hybridity is nomenclature, since efforts have been made to wield different conceptualisations of it under different names, such as the French term *métissage*, the Spanish term *mestizaje*, and the English terms miscegenation, transculturation, and creolisation. Joshua Lund notes one such example in Néstor García Canclini's gesture to separate the concepts of *mestizaje* and hybridisation (*hibridación*), and his retreat years later in that gesture because of a perceived equal validity and sameness of the terms. It is also interesting that Lund underscores that Bhabha's concept of hybridity was not a new phenomenon to Latin Americans and, in fact, "many wondered aloud what all the fuss was about." Latin Americans have always been familiar with the concept of hybridity under the cognate of *mestizaje*, and García Canclini, Argentinian theorist of Latin American studies in the fields of sociology and anthropology, did publish a ground-breaking work on hybridity in 1989 called *Culturas híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad*, preceding Bhabha's *Location of Culture* (1994).

The concept of *mestizaje* is fundamental for understanding Latin American culture and societies. It goes back to the 16th century to denote the mixing of Spanish and Indian/indigenous blood, marking a "privileged category of mixed ancestry" among other mixed peoples of the colonial era. African peoples were also part of this racial mixing. The Spanish distinguished themselves from mixed people in the Americas so as to wield "order and control" in this new geographical space. Products of forbidden unions often between Spanish men and Indian women (and, less so, Spanish women and Indian men), mestizos were considered socially "illegitimate," often aberrant, but generally stronger than the Indians. Their social acceptance was subject to the discretion of the Spanish, who would act as patrons to some and exempt them from being considered mixed, naming them Spanish instead. The power of this patron depended on his own social status in colonial society. As soon as more and more Africans arrived in the Americas, Afro-Europeans/mulattos emerged all over the Americas, leaving a large population of Afro-indigenous peoples in places where vast groups of Indians managed to survive Spanish colonisation. In such places as the Caribbean, Brazil and northern parts of South America, where little to no indigenous groups survived, mulatto people have come to be the prominent demo-graphic (Schwaller).

Mesti-bridity?

Peter Wade, in his substantial article "Rethinking Mestizaje: Ideology and Experience," asserts that mestizaje is at one and the same time ideology and lived experience. For him, mestizaje as ideology is two-pronged: 1) scholarly/"official" rhetoric that racially and culturally categorises Latin American nationhoods as mestizo, thereby disregarding the oppression of minority groups such as the indigenous and the blacks; 2) a theory of resistance for oppressed groups to use racial taxonomies other than that of the coloniser's, creating one's own and relabelling oneself (242). In sum, it entails the definition of a nation as essentially racially and culturally mixed, so much so that it is nonsensical for racism and other conflicts regarding cultural difference to thrive. It generalises the nation as one—a homogeneous whole—regardless of its glaring diversity and differences.

Wade argues that mestizaje as lived experience is both the ideology of mestizaje itself alongside the embodied practices of racial-cultural difference, thus making this lived experience both "symbolic" and "structural" (239-240). He states that mestizaje is traditionally considered in the context of nationhood, but as lived experience foregrounds the individual and the family in the context of the nation (240).

Still, what makes mestizaje a complex term is the way in which it eludes precise definition in Latin American scholarship due to the way in which it treads thin lines between inclusion and exclusion, sameness and difference (Wade, 240). Wade highlights that the scholarship on mestizaje is unreliable because it is a discourse dominated by the "national elites" of Hispanic nations (241). Surely, their aim was to impose and foster a sense of national identity rather than account for the reality of colonial and post-colonial racial-cultural relations. But this whitewashing of the nation is untenable since, as Wade contests, "the very idea of mixture depends fundamentally on the idea not only of whiteness, but also of blackness and indigenousness. The idea of the mestizo nation needs the image of '*los negros*' and '*los indios*' (or, given the gendered nature of *mestizaje*, one might say, of '*las negras*' and '*las indias*')" (243). And despite the fact that mestizaje as ideology enforces homogenisation, it doesn't quite attain it. Racial-cultural difference is not erased, because the upper classes must make these distinctions in

order to maintain their societal superiority. Therefore, blacks and indigenous peoples are, at one and the same time, marginalised and included in the mestizo nation (245-246).

For Wade, the concept of mestizaje seeks efficacy in that of hybridity. He argues that mestizaje as ideology is emboldened by contemporary notions of hybridity as a subversive phenomenon--subversive by means of dismissing polar identity constructs and inserting a third one. Yet, mestizaje as ideology cannot fully claim this subversive power since, in Latin America, it turns out to be oppressive and exclusionary to indigenous and black peoples (Wade 243). It seems, then, that what is necessary for the scholar is to act, much like Wade does, as ethnographer in the search for the subversive potential of mestizaje/hybridity (*mesti*-bridity) in terms of real-life practices, while not dismissing its discursive ideology.

The ultimate utility of Wade's paper manifests when he proposes that we see mestizaje, much like Bhabha's theorisation of hybridity, as:

> ...a space of struggle and contest. It is not a reason for automatic optimism or for Latin Americans to feel benevolent about their societies simply because mestizaje can have inclusive effects. It is a site of struggle to see what and who is going to be included and excluded, and in what way; to see to what extent existing value hierarchies can be disrupted. (ibid 246)

This submittal forms precisely the tenet and scope of my argument. In conjunction with the notion of "a space of struggle and contest," I aim to analyse the Cuba in Fulleda's *Plácido* as the "third space" to which Bhabha refers. In this space, and primarily through the protagonist Plácido, both African and Spanish racial and cultural identities eclipse to perform a process of negotiation of Cubanness, of national belonging. This negotiation is to be seen as contentious but promising insofar that white supremacy is challenged effectively though at a hefty cost.

Hence, my neologism "*mesti*-bridity" is an effort to treat mestizaje with the subversive quality that hybridity discourse offers. Much like the way in which races and cultures mix and become hybridised, "*mesti*-bridity" emerges as a multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary term. It is to be understood as both ideology and lived experience, as Wade suggests, but only in the context of Latin America since any effort to understand its cultures, peoples, and societies necessarily involves revisiting the concept of *mestizaje* and a *mestizo* Latin American sense of nationhood and identity. Of course, there will be implications for such a coined term, such as the generalisation of a Latin American historical experience. Surely, Latin America of the continent and that of the Caribbean share similar yet different stories, but it is the fact that *mestizaje*/hybridity (*mesti*-bridity) is premised on the notion of containing both sameness and difference that makes it a plausible concept.

Fulleda and the Poetics of Mestizaje/Hybridity in Plácido (1982)

It is important to note that *Plácido* emerged only a few years after Cuba's *quinquenio gris* (Five Grey Years, 1971-1975), which was a period marked by heavy repression of cultural and intellectual activity on the island. Reminiscing on her 11-year stay in Cuba under Castro's rule, Margaret Randall writes in her book that "[d]espite its name, most agree that this period lasted longer than five years—some would argue that vestiges remain—and that gray is too pale a description" (Randall 176). The major event leading up to this dark time for writers and intellectuals was the controversial Padilla Affair (1968-1971), in which famed poet Heberto Padilla was imprisoned for political dissidence in 1971. He had won one of the nation's prestigious writer's awards for his collection *Fuera del juego* (1968), which contained a plethora of political commentary deemed counterrevolutionary. Even before this, Padilla had clashed with government officials whom he chided for the new arbitrary policies which stifled the freedom of cultural and intellectual expression on the island.

Fulleda was not exempt from this harsh climate for literary creativity, especially as an Afro-Cuban. He had lost a great part of his writer identity with the government shutdown of the *El Puente* young writer's group and their literary magazine *Lunes de Revolución* in 1965 to which he belonged. The group was markedly transgressive in its ideologies which spanned racial politics and sexuality. But Fulleda is keen to justify in his interview with Linda Howe that *El Puente* was, rather than anti-revolutionary per se, "too revolutionary" (Howe 38)—that is, they were a force of revolution within the Revolution. Government repression was also meted out to a rising Black Power-inspired movement in the 1960s. Howe tells us that the term "Black Power" itself wields, even today, such separatist and anti-revolutionary connotation under the perception of the revolutionary government, that writers remain wary of its use (76). Still, Howe mentions that many Afro-Cuban writings that proceeded the 1960s were inspired by the government's earlier negative reaction to Afro-Cuban writings that reflected the North American Black Power, Black Panther and Malcolm X milieu (7). Inevitably, we come to see Fulleda's *Plácido* as one of these writings given the strong undertones of racial defiance that it carries, and we are further compelled to question the reason for its reversion to history, to 1835-1845.

There are several examples of black Cuban writers and intellectuals, and allies, who were maligned by government officials for their work on black matters: Walterio Carbonell for his struggle to have Afro-Cuban history represented in public schools' curricula; Sara Gomez for her filmic works which highlighted the continuation of racial prejudice despite the Revolution's claim to its eradication; and Tomás González (dramatist) and Alberto Pedro Díaz (ethnologist) for inciting radical black ideologies (Benson 235). It is no

wonder, then, that many of these individuals retreated to self-repression/self-censorship. Howe had the opportunity to have Tomás Fernández Robaina and Pedro Pérez Sarduy admit to doing this (91-92). It is arguable in this context, therefore, that Fulleda's use of historical writing acts as a sort of camouflage for his present-day (1982) racial/writer's angst and criticism. By denouncing the injustices of the past, he is casting a gaze on the present and condemning it likewise—a defiant, transgressive act which manages to escape being politically offensive.

As earlier noted, the objective of this study is to investigate the extent to which the poetics of mestizaje/hybridity—as a process of negotiation, struggle, contest, and subversion—run throughout Gerardo Fulleda León's play, *Plácido* (1982). I will argue that Fulleda's purpose in this text is subversive, and that by revisiting a controversial incident of Cuba's colonial history, he attempts to reconstruct the notion of a Cuban national identity. Additionally, I aim to unravel his interrogation of the concept of *mestizaje* and cultural hybridity through the use of specifically chosen characters and their interactions, and how these characters mediate or negotiate between hybridity as ideology and as lived experience, i.e. how both their speech/beliefs and actions elucidate the racial and cultural complexities of the era.

Plácido is a fictional dramatic representation of the life and death of the famous Cuban poet Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés who goes by the pen name Plácido. Plácido only lived for 35 years; he was executed on June 28, 1844 in Matanzas, Cuba by colonial officials for alleged involvement in the conspiracy of a slave revolt known as *Conspiración de La Escalera*. He was a free mulatto who believed in the equal recognition of all races in Cuba, championing the cause for the involvement of Afro-Cubans in a predominantly Euro-Hispanic colonial Cuban nationhood. His way of death was quite ironic because of this very fact, and he died denying the accusation against him, terming it a *sello ignominioso* (ignominious seal) and a *mancha* (stain) in his poem "Plegaria a Dios" ("Supplication to God") (Matibag).

Fulleda revisits colonial Cuba in *Plácido* by constructing a racially stratified society (*sistema de casta*) with Plácido, a hybrid himself, at the centre of the plot. All the characters are carefully chosen in race and occupation to bring out issues of race, class, identity and nationhood in the play. There are *criollos/as*, *negros/as*, *pardos/as*, *morenos/as*, *esclavos/as*, *burgueses blancos* and *burgueses negros*, with the plot spanning the period of 1835-1845 in Matanzas and La Habana, Cuba. Plácido is precisely labelled an *ochavón*, bordering on white in skin tone but notably African in certain features, such as *bembón* (thick-lipped) and *cabellos encrespados* (curly hair). In the same way he appears split in racial and physical appearance, Plácido's character is moulded as controversial in his relations with the different ethnic people around him whom he must both identify with and separate himself from, that is, emerge as the other of his own self. Unequivocally, then, Fulleda strikes up a discourse of hybridity imbued with a problematic unitary vision of the nation.

The poetic narrator of *Plácido*, Jesús, functions to transport Fulleda's vision. We receive Fulleda's purpose from the inception of the play through Jesús who announces the word *armonía* (harmony) and who adopts the word as a self-referential title for the rest of the play. Jesús/Armonía provides contextual information about Plácido, particularly that he was the product of a forbidden interracial relationship and consequently abandoned at birth. We are also predisposed to the unjust nature of his death and thus invoked to a sense that the work is a commemoration of his lifeworks and values. However, given the scepticism surrounding Plácido's character, the narrator halts to claim a non-didactic approach to the play, urging the audience to "mirar y luego opinar / y, con tacto, combinar / la lección que nos dé [Plácido] ahora" (42-43).

Characters Who Transgress Racial and Class Values

From the first scene, Fulleda demonstrates the skewed ideologies of *mestizaje* which govern the racial and class values of colonial Cuba by juxtaposing two creole characters to set an atmosphere of contestation. We witness the marked attitudinal difference towards race by two creole Cuban men, Don Braulio and Don Esteban, businessman and landowner respectively, who sit and drink at a house party. While Don Esteban talks about ongoing slave resistance and expresses a vengeful desire to murder the slaves, Don Braulio calmly disapproves: "Usted ya está pasado de rosca, amigo mío. No cabe duda" (187). Paulette Ramsay treats this moment of dialogue between the two men as a "typical discussion among landowners" ("On Page" 226), overlooking the irony that both men belong to the same social class yet defy the expectation that they should typify the same ideologies. This can be read as an effort on the part of Fulleda to subvert pro-slavery ideology and expose the vulnerability of the power relations of that social class and its hegemonic rule, since their oppressive stranglehold might not have been as tenable as it seemed.

Similarly, in the said scene, the two men clash over the matter of forbidden sexual relations between the planter class and the slave class. The womaniser that he is, Don Braulio flirts and gropes at Mamá Inés, the maid, against her will. Don Esteban is stupefied and denounces the act as "ayuntamiento con las bestias" (188). This comment underlines the longstanding ideas of racism in Cuba—indeed, colonialism marked the beginning of racism in the New World. Furthermore, Ramsay highlights how the planters' sexual patronisation of slave women reflected the power imbalance of the era ("On Page" 227). However, for Don Esteban, Don Braulio's act threatens the power of the planter class: "Eso, eso es lo que nos impide mantener las distancias y las diferencias. Eso! ¿Cómo no se van a creer seres humanos, si les dispensamos el mismo deseo

que a personas de nuestra condición y raza?" (189). What is interesting here is how Fulleda then uses Don Braulio to undermine this argument with sarcasm: "Muy bien dicho, don Esteban Santa Cruz de Oviedo, muy bien dicho. Demuestra usted ser un excelente cristiano y hacendado criollo, ilustrado por más decir..." (189). Surely, there is truth in Don Esteban's assertion of the unsettling nature of hybridity given the socio-political context, and there is evidence in Don Braulio's nonchalant nature that could characterise him as naïve to this truth, but the fact that Fulleda allows Don Braulio to poke Don Esteban's view with mockery by calling attention to his moral integrity effectively weakens his authority. Again, this is more powerfully achieved through irony, for in pointing out the "wrongdoing" of Don Braulio, Don Esteban turns the gaze on himself and Fulleda effectively manages to invalidate his racist thinking.

It is also noteworthy that Don Braulio should comment, in the same moment of dialogue, that the flesh is uninhibited by racial differences: "... ¡la carne es un desastre! Ahí se vienen abajo todas las diferencias" (189). Don Esteban retorts that one has to control such desires regardless: "Pues ahí también hay que mantenerlas" (189), yet it is the same Don Esteban we see later in Scene IX having a secret romantic affair with his slave, Polonia. By portraying him as pretentious, Fulleda manages to reveal how *mestizaje* as practice undermined discursive *mestizaje*, which prescribed stark levels of separation on the basis of race and class; the white "superior" planter class is exposed for its active involvement in the very thing that it claims to prohibit. Apart from the fact that it underscores the way in which racial mixing was more rigid in theory than in reality, it can also be seen as a way of remediating the black subject in light of a scorned colonial past and legitimising the concept of a mixed racial identity without vilifying the black component.

In continuing with the effective employment of juxtaposition of characters, Fulleda uses Celia and Teté, two wealthy Creole women, to further show—but also undermine—the racial attitudes and class values of colonial Cuba. In said Scene I, Celia is seen to be more receptive to hybrid unions while Teté is totally disapproving of them. In their conversation about hybrid men at Minerva's house party, Teté expresses her racial prejudice against men of colour: "... Yo aún soy virgen y creyente... y me aterran tanto esas cosas de pardos y morenos" (193). Although not outrightly denouncing Teté as prejudiced, Celia verbally jabs her as too "prudish":

> TETÉ: Yo no sé qué pueden verle las mujeres decentes a esos...
> CELIA: Lo mismo que le verías tú, si no fueras tan mojigata. (193)

Again, by pitting one against the other, Fulleda achieves the effect of subversion because of the marked discrepancy between their ideologies of *mestizaje*, despite belonging to the same social class. Teté is made to be seen as particularly unlikeable because Celia, expected to express a similarly antagonistic view of the hybrid subject, does not conform to the social ethos. This is doubly effective because the contestation is not enacted by Other; it is Self that undermines Self and seeks to overthrow its own hierarchical establishment.

Female Tactics of "Negotiation" in the Hybrid Space

Fulleda uses certain women in *Plácido* to show a mestizaje in motion that regulated race and class construction in colonial Cuba. These women undertake transgressive acts to negotiate social mobility and ease tension and conflict in the volatile cultural space that they inhabit. By means of juxtaposition, we meet two free *parda* (of European, West African and Native American ancestry) women, Mercedes and Caridad, in Scene VII talking about their family life. But there is a notable disparity in their values. While Mercedes reflects romantically on her marriage, Caridad boasts about her daughter and the prospects that she shows for climbing the social ladder due to her marrying a *blanco* (white man):

> CARIDAD: Fachada y nivel. Pues como bien dice mi marido. ¿Qué negocio no prospera en esta Isla, si al frente aparece un blanco y de buena cara?
> MERCEDES: Todo parece muy bien. Pero... ¿no se les habrá olvidado algo?
> CARIDAD: ¿Algo? Creo que no.
> MERCEDES: Si tú lo dices...
> CARIDAD: Y el amor... ¡Pues puede venir luego! Lo importante es lo otro.
> MERCEDES: ¡No me digas! (252)

It is notable that Caridad envisions, through her daughter, a kind of desired whiteness which, in her eyes, is an achievement for its implications of racial purification and material wealth. While this corroborates with the way in which colonial Cuba enforced the concept of *blanqueamiento* (whitening) as a sign of social progress, Fulleda makes her seem rather pitiful, for it is through the deft treatment of Mercedes in her own versioned stories and surprised outbursts that we receive Fulleda's implicit attitude of derision, which is potent for the overturning of a regressive colonial mentality that class should be dependent on race and colour.

Similarly, Fulleda uses Polonia to underscore the way in which some slave women used their bodies sexually to manipulate the system of slavery. A black slave, Polonia envisions her escape from the harshness of her condition through sexual relations with her owner, which, she reasons while at the pub in Scene VIII with regular patrons, will consequently result in mixed-race babies and their own liberation from the slave condition. While it is factual that slave women were

coerced by their masters into performing sexual acts with them because of the gender power imbalance that existed then, Ramsay makes the important claim here that Polonia is complicit in her own subjugation ("On Page" 228). Her role is parallel in this regard to Mamy of Quince Duncan's *La paz del pueblo* (1978), a slave woman of the Moody household who perceives her sexual involvement with the Moody men as a means of gaining power over them and, in addition, their white women (Ramsay, "From Object" 21). To this end, both women are victims and perpetrators of their gendered objectification. Fulleda makes a notable effort to criticise this thinking when he uses Mamá Inés and Plácido to upstage Polonia's character (271-273), foregrounding the point that the use of the female body as a site of resistance in this underhand way perpetuates white hegemony. That Mamá Inés and Plácido mock and jeer her to anger effectively transports Fulleda's subversive intent, and Polonia is made to seem rather pitiful. She has internalised white values so much that she is blind to the fact that she ends up hating and oppressing her own race. The use of the metaphor *culebra* (snake) appropriately conveys her cunningness, as we soon see her in Scene IX in romantic engagement with Don Esteban trading information with him about the planning of slave rebellions in a *santería*-like ritual performance. In this instance, it becomes clear that she is being used and is made to be seen as even more powerless in her status as black, woman, and slave.

Perhaps the most vivid and successful show of negotiation, this time in the political sense, is the patrons' encounter at the bar in Scene VIII with the military officials. The bar itself serves as a site of resistance as we learn that it is a safe haven for runaway slaves, and it is for this reason that the military officials come searching for the slave Agustín Kongué, interrupting the revelry of the patrons. But it is the performance of rebellious acts, initiated by Plácido, that ensues that truly reflects the intricacy of the negotiation that hybrid spaces necessitate:

Entran el Teniente y el Cabo.
TENIENTE: Que nadie se mueva de su lugar.
¡Inspección militar! ¿Alguien aquí se llama
Agustín Kongué, hijo de Amancio Kongué?
¡Vamos! ¿Quién es aquí Agustín Kongué? Que se
muestre inmediatamente o luego le irá peor.
Expectación general. Agustín va a pararse.
PLÁCIDO: (*Adelantándose.*) Yo me llamo Agustín Kongué.
TENIENTE: ¿Usted?
CABO: No le haga caso, mi teniente, él es el poeta aquel
que una vez...
TENIENTE: Sí, ya sé, lo recordamos muy bien. ¿Tiene
ganas de bromear el mestizo? Ya veo.
PLÁCIDO: Dije que me llamo Agustín Kongué.
TENIENTE: ¡Ja, pero...!
CRESCENCIO: Yo soy Agustín Kongué.
CABO: ¿Cómo?
AMBROSIO: Yo me llamo Agustín Kongué.
CABO: Pero... ¿qué es esto?
TENIENTE: Se están buscando un encarcelamiento
todos por burlar a la justicia. ¿Quién es
realmente aquí Agustín Kongué? Si no acaban
con la gracia, van a pagar justos por pecadores.
Mamá Inés retiene a Agustín en su asiento.
TODOS: Yo soy Agustín Kongué. (274-275)

Fulleda's use of parody here is very effective in the way it serves to confuse and undermine the presence of the colonial authorities. For Ramsay, it marks Fulleda's emphasis of "the urgency of individual agency" ("On Page" 235), and the act is indeed admirable.

However, despite the fact that Plácido is the instigator of this rebellious act, it is Mamá Inés's role as woman which proves more outstanding. As the act intensifies, the Teniente and Cabo get more incensed and threaten to multiply their presence. Mamá Inés then asserts herself with wit and cunning to pacify the situation by singing a subversive lullaby (276-277). Her deployment of maternal instinct in the mother-baby allegorisation of herself and the colonial authorities respectively, effectively casts her as the power holder in this instance. She acts under the guise of a caring figure to assuage the tension at hand but what she is actually doing and does achieve is to beguile them into retreat. Fulleda's adeptness at language shows here: the rhyme pattern, the hard and soft sounds produced, and the repetition all serve to convey the credibility and conviction of Mamá Inés's camouflaged verbal subversion.

The Adverse Politics of Interracial Relationships

As earlier noted, the concept of *mestizaje* prescribed a rigid separation of social classes in Hispanic societies according to race, but individuals would defy this prescription and negotiate new social statuses. For a *mulato* like Plácido, it meant enjoying certain privileges of white society, like choosing white women as spouses, though still not immune to racial contempt. Ramsay notes in this context that "in the ethos of the period the male/female relationship was seen as a site where racial prejudices were played out—that is, people's choice of spouses indicated their racial prejudices ("On Page" 227). Fulleda makes an interesting case of this with Celia and Plácido. As a couple, the two are seen together in Scene II in a highly problematic love affair. In using Celia to typify the racist values of her Creole class, Fulleda allows her to perpetuate a lot of black stereotypes, none of which Plácido embodies and which he therefore seizes the moment to invalidate. She comments how ugly Plácido looks in the daylight, calling attention to the curls of his hair. She later references Plácido's race as cannibal in

nature when Plácido jokingly cautions her to not be so wild in her kissing him. But it is the song that she sings next that serves to expose her ignorance and consequently undermine her racial slurs:

> CELIA: ¡Pero miren quién dice eso! ¡Los caníbales son ustedes! ¡Ja! (*Canta.*)
> Tú y yo somos iguales:
> vamos juntos al jardín,
> tú cosechas los tomates
> yo los como en el festín.
>
> JESÚS: La señora valora la compra de la mercancía. (206)

Fulleda highlights here Celia's sub-conscious thought process which gives shape to the prejudice she verbalises. Her concept of equality is premised on the flawed notion of a subservient Other, the reaper, who ensures the well-being of Self, the superior consumer. The interjection of the narrator, Jesús, here serves to embolden the irony of this construct which Fulleda seemingly suggests is the very antithesis of a positive hybrid construct.

The dramatist then activates once again the subversive latency of hybridity that lies in Plácido, allowing him to make one kind remark that manages to overturn Celia's ideology. In her unkind remark to Plácido that black people are equal to monkeys, Plácido simply expresses his unconditional love for her (207), which serves to place the villainous and ludicrous gaze on her and undermine her belief. Plácido's love is unconditional because it shows that perceivable racial differences do not inhibit how he feels for her, and in this way he is made to be seen as mentally liberated, which translates to Celia as mentally imprisoned. Of course, her mental imprisonment is buttressed on the social dictates of her time, as is reflected in her fear of being socially ridiculed if she does not opt to keep her relationship with Plácido clandestine (207-208). Here, the playwright conveys her as pathetic. She has embraced the precepts of racial hierarchy so much that she is blinded to the fact that love is supposed to be mutually beneficial instead of for selfish gain. That the reader and Plácido alike are able to discern her perverse definition of love—and she is not—effectively focuses the attention on Fulleda's show of "colonial racial psychology."

The fact, then, that it is only in her imagination that true happiness with Plácido can be found makes for an interesting observation. In her fantasy world, she sees herself and Plácido in public spaces spending romantic moments together, but when the *cartucho* (balloon) that Plácido gives her as a promise of his return breaks, she returns to a miserable reality and immediately calls Plácido a "negro de mierda" (213). The bursting of the *cartucho* heightens the effect with which the binary of reality and fantasy is received, and it becomes clear that Fulleda wants to call attention to the oppressive stranglehold of societal disapproval of interracial relationships of colonial Cuba. Through Plácido, however, he demonstrates the practical possibility of surviving the oppression since, in both real and imagined worlds, Plácido is at peace with himself and his union with Celia; he chooses to look beyond differences, he chooses to look beyond Self and Other. Hence, when he decides to leave Celia's house and Celia asks if he still loves her, the rhetorical question with which Plácido replies is so pointed and poignant:

> CELIA: No, aún es temprano. Plácido... ¿aún me quieres?
> PLÁCIDO: Sí... Pero... ¿es posible querernos? (*Sale.*) (213)

It is safe to say, however, that acceptance of Self and Other is much easier for someone like Plácido because he is the very embodiment of both and thus is more strategically poised to challenge the status quo.

One way of contesting colonial power is to re-version the (hi)stories of blacks against "official" Eurocentric ones. Here, Fulleda uses Plácido to right the wrong of discursive *mestizaje*, to wrest it from arbitrary colonial control. When Celia tells Plácido one of her childhood memories of a slave boy who was beaten along with a maid for stealing, Plácido quickly seizes the opportunity to tell the story of an interracial love affair that, upon its discovery by colonial authorities, resulted in the severe and inhumane physical abuse of the African male partner (209-210). Celia's worldview represents the way in which much of the histories of Afro-Hispanics have been told from biased Eurocentric perspectives, and thus Plácido's act of contestation or re-versioning serves to obliterate that biased discourse. Plácido's story underscores the severe attitudes of Spanish settlers towards racial mixing in the colonial era, but the punishment meted out for "violations" of racial relations are never told or documented as brutality—that is, from an African perspective—but as just. In setting up this juxtaposition, then, Fulleda effectively refracts the demonic gaze onto the coloniser.

Another interesting treatment of the complexity of interracial relationships in colonial Cuba is carried out with Plácido and his creole mother, Concepción Vazquez. Their relationship is a clandestine one, like his love affair with Celia, because Plácido is the product of her youthful "forbidden act." Though Plácido is quite disposed to disliking his mother given the circumstance of his frowned-upon mixed race and also his abandonment at birth, we see him shower her with love on his annual visit in Scene IV:

> PLÁCIDO: (Entrando con una rosa en la mano.) Buenos días, señora.
> CONCEPCIÓN: Buenos días, siempre cumplidor.
> PLÁCIDO: Una flor para otra flor.
> CONCEPCIÓN: Y siempre tan galante, gracias.
> PLÁCIDO: Para mí es una dicha este día. Es la oportunidad de demostrarle mi respeto y sentimientos hacia usted. (222-223)

Here, Fulleda notably corroborates with the history of the real-life Plácido who, according to Inés María Martiatu Terry, was always endearing of his mother (179). However, ironically, it is Concepción in the play who harbours ill feelings towards Plácido. When Rosales comes, interrupts their conversation, then leaves, it is a trigger of embitterment for her and she begins to blame Plácido for the life of public scrutiny that she has had to live as a result of giving birth to him (231). Clearly, this scorned treatment is unfair to Plácido, and it does say more about her character than that of Plácido. Like Celia, she too has absorbed the colonial values of race relations and fails to recognise that her embitterment lies in her attitude to the situation and not in the situation itself. It is her inability to prevent social norms and dictates from infiltrating on and staining her motherly love that perpetuates her misery and remorse. Meanwhile, Plácido has absolutely no qualms about his mixed race, and it is this attitudinal indifference that defines him as calm and easy-going, hence the appropriateness of his very name. Fulleda thus suggests Plácido as an exemplar, as noted in Plácido's kind advice to Concepción that she forgets about the past instead of lamenting about it:

> PLÁCIDO: No se atormente usted.
> CONCEPCIÓN: Son los demás los que me han atormentado siempre.
> PLÁCIDO: ¡Olvídelos, viva! (225-226)

It would seem that Fulleda's intent is not to vilify Concepción's character but merely to show how untended negotiation within the "third space" in which she exists can effect a particular kind of haunting fate; for Concepción can be seen as redeemable and a victim of her circumstance. When Rosales comes by, she is forced to pretend Plácido is her hairdresser and not her son. Ramsay identifies Concepción as "pathetic" in this instance ("On Page" 233); however, she is to be seen as admirable in the way she takes offence, releases her inhibitions, and tries to verbally undermine Rosales's presence after he insults and discriminates against Plácido:

> ROSALES: ¿Cómo recibes a ése aquí? No están las cosas para tener de visita a gente de su ralea. Ya basta con soportar a esa Belén.
> CONCEPCIÓN: Él es una persona decente y...
> ROSALES: El mestizo más decente es ladrón.
> CONCEPCIÓN: Y el blanco un hijo de puta.
> ROSALES: ¿Cómo?
> CONCEPCIÓN: Nada. ¡Bromas! ¿Quieres esperarme en la saleta, eh? Enseguida estoy contigo. (229)

Even though she ends up relenting, it is the effort that she makes to contest colonial values that makes the reader a little more empathetic to her struggle.

Plácido and the Hybrid Gaze

It is interesting to note the different attitudes towards Plácido when he makes his first appearance at Minerva's party. As a hybrid subject, he manages to awe, intrigue and unsettle the patrons all at the same time. For Teté, he is a disappointment because of his social class and physical hybrid appearance: "Pero no. Si es un pobretón liberto y pardo" (199). For Don Esteban, he is an unwelcome threat because of his known political values: "¿Pero cómo han traído aquí a ese... ¡a ese antiesclavista! (200). For Minerva, he is a charm because of his poetic skills: "¡Ah, beso la cruz! Qué delicia poder oírlo. ¡Quién lo diría!" (202). For Mamá Inés, he is an anomaly for the contrast between his Afro-Cuban aesthetics and his erudite command of the Spanish language: "Pero... ¿de dónde sacó tal lindura ese mulato?" (204). This multi-layered gaze on Plácido precisely underscores Bhabha's delineation of the hybrid subject as both "contradictory and ambivalent" (Bhabha 208). In this case, it is not Plácido who must reconcile with his complexity, but those around him.

Apart from his physical appearance, it is Plácido's use of language which is most reflective of his unsettling double image. Fulleda aptly employs sarcasm and wit to bring out this effect. At Minerva's party, Plácido manages to undermine Don Braulio and Don Esteban in a conversation about his occupation as poet:

> DON BRAULIO: ¿Pero no trajo guitarra?
> PLÁCIDO: Vengo con mi talento.
> DON BRAULIO: ¿Qué nuevo instrumento es ése?
> PLÁCIDO: Uno que quizás usted nunca haya tocado...
> DON BRAULIO: ¿Cómo?
> PLÁCIDO: ...porque su cuerda es más opulenta y terrena.
> DON ESTEBAN: ¡Ja! Tiene talento el poeta.
> PLÁCIDO: Pero no mayor ingenio que usted.
> DON ESTEBAN: ¡Seguro!
> PLÁCIDO: Pero recuerde que el suyo marcha gracias al sudor de nosotros.
> DON BRAULIO: Es simpatiquísimo. (201)

Here, Plácido is seen as very openly subversive. This is buttressed by the historical information of the real-life Plácido, who is said to have sported deliberate transgressive attitudes, especially in the way he dressed (Martiatu Terry 180). That Don Braulio interprets his transgression as *simpatiquísimo* (very nice) carries a double meaning; maybe it is an attempt at ridicule through sarcasm, or maybe Plácido's meaning escapes him. In either case, it serves to reinforce the subversive power that Plácido carries.

Similarly, in his notable pursuit of racial equality, Plácido seizes another opportunity to deride hegemonic racist discourse at Minerva's party when Teté asks if he knows English. Plácido responds: "Sólo algo de francés: "*Liberté, egalité, fraternité...*". Y, todo lo que está lejos de aquí,

por suerte, *madame*…" (202). The subsequent argument and confusion that ensues around Plácido's intentions upon saying this underpins the unsettling nature of Plácido's character. Through his later satirical speech, he is characterised as a man to be feared:

> PLÁCIDO: La tierra es como los hombres.
> Y por eso se los traga.
> Para devorar, mantiene.
> Para destruir, halaga. (205)

Fulleda's use of simile here to parallel the destructive unpredictability of the land (Plácido) to the ignorance and vulnerability of man (the Creole class) is quite effective in transporting the idea that Plácido operates under ruse and pretense because of the very fact that his free coloured status blurs the line of racial allegiance.

A White Cuba

Nineteenth-century Cuba was a very racist society in which the call for a "white Cuba" rose to particular prominence at the realisation that blacks were fast outnumbering whites because of the expansion of slave labour and because of the evidences of *mestizaje* in the society. It did not matter that the island had the highest number of whites in all the West Indian plantation colonies, for whites alone could not meet the demand for plantation labour (Knight 181). The subsequent recourse to fervently attract white emigration to the colony would effectively fulfil the ideal of social and moral progress, as it was believed that blacks only tainted the sovereignty of the colony. Haiti, having successfully toppled the system of slavery to establish its independence and become the first black republic of the New World in 1804, was a constant reminder of the possibility of what could happen should the Spanish colonists not assert themselves. To this end, leading intellectual of the era José Antonio Saco propagandised in his writings, "To whiten, to whiten, to whiten and soon to demand respect" (Morales Domínguez 52).

Fulleda revisits the era's social ethos in *Plácido* to undermine its exclusionary premise and racist view of a national Cuban identity—in effect, its *mestizaje* ideology. In Scene V, we see three young Creole intellectuals—Alfredo, Orestes, and Claudio—sit by a river making racial commentary on colonial Cuba. Typifying the views of his social class, Alfredo strongly asserts that the solution to Cuba's racial problem is a whitening of the nation. It is then that Plácido enters the scene and interrupts this line of reasoning with his hybrid presence and sarcastic use of language:

> PLÁCIDO: (*Entrando*.) ¡Eh, qué grupito tan selecto y armonioso! Desde la otra orilla se oyen sus gritos. ¿Qué, arreglan al mundo? (234-235)

Though not a radical denouncement, the effect of sarcasm here properly emphasises Plácido's opposition. It not only infers the moral disdain that characterises such ethnocentricity but also suggests a vision for Afro-Cubans to be included and accepted equally in the recognition of a Cuban national identity. The inherent divisiveness of a polarised white Cuban national identity is effectively evoked by the fact that Plácido hears their opinions "from the other side" of the river, and Fulleda purposely disrupts this anti-progressive thinking and replaces it with a more positive discourse of *mestizaje*.

Another treatment of anti-Black sentiment within the context of national identity is made with Plácido and Arcino, the latter typifying the colonial mimic-man. By means of juxtaposition, the two ensue in an argument in Scene VII over foreign and local culture—that is, European and Cuban. While Plácido makes a case for the inclusion of Afro-Cuban aesthetics in national Cuban culture and identity, Arcino, of African descent himself, takes serious offence and deems Plácido's view as regressive and an indignation (260). That he refuses to accept African-derived culture as part of Cuba's cultural fabric underscores his internalisation of colonial white values, which puts him at odds with his own self and exposes him as mentally colonised, much like the previously elaborated case of Polonia. This points to the way in which some Black Cubans of the era denied their blackness for acceptance by the white superior class. That Fulleda uses Plácido, however, to lyrically jab Arcino highlights Arcino as pitiable. The metaphoric imagery of the glass ceiling (*vidrio del tejado*) and stones (*piedras*) effectively captures the irony of his belief and nullifies his reasoning.

Plácido's Death: The Struggle for Nationhood

The event of Plácido's execution and, by extension *La Escalera*, was a most perverse show of white hegemony—a testament to the toxicity of the colonial hybrid space. On hearing rumour of an impending slave revolt in 1844, Spanish general Leopoldo O'Donnell sanctioned the torture and hanging of hundreds of slaves and mulattoes and sought to eliminate the free coloureds by exiling more than 700 of them, removing them from positions of authority and confiscating all their possessions. Despite the ambiguity in which it is enveloped, the incident has been denounced a "travesty of justice," for, according to one captain-general of the era, José de la Concha:

> The findings of the military commission produced the execution, confiscation of property, and expulsion from the island of a great many persons of color, but it did not find arms, munitions, documents, or any other incriminating object which proved that there was such a conspiracy, much less on such a vast scale. (qtd. in Knight 95)

The incident was therefore one motivated by fear to inflict fear. Franklin Knight notes that the period of 1820 and 1844 had witnessed a number of small slave uprisings in Cuba because of the boom in plantation slavery (96). Locked in the middle of the growing tension between planter and slave were the free coloureds who, according to Knight, had had a considerably good relationship with the planter class prior to the recent events (95-96). The free coloureds were known to be involved in the rebellions. But, according to Cuban historian Eduardo Torres Cuevas, their involvement was not as driven by race and class issues as it was by a desire for national independence since they envisioned an autonomous state that paid equal respect to each citizen's ideas regardless of race (qtd. in Martiatu Terry 182). This vision of nationhood was a serious threat, for it implicated the dispossession of the power of Spain and the hegemonic creole class. To this end, the free coloureds were doubly opposed and demonised, their only allies being the non-white oppressed groups.

In the play, therefore, Plácido's struggle to clear himself of the alleged conspiracy is a futile one. It does not matter if he is guilty or not; the very fact that he is a free coloured who wants equality for all is sufficient reason for the hegemonic powers to eliminate his transgressive presence. We learn of his accusation in Scene X immediately after Scene IX, in which Polonia informs Don Esteban of a slave conspiracy, and can thus deduce that Don Esteban is the one who submits the accusation to the military powers, Teniente and Cabo. It is noteworthy that Don Esteban has never liked Plácido, as we witness from the very first scene his rash attitude towards him at Minerva's party: "Pero cómo han traído aquí a ese… ¡a ese antiesclavista!" (200), and this would suggest his willingness to connive against Plácido. The Cabo implicates Plácido as guilty by association: "No cabe duda, sus continuos viajes al interior tenían un carácter conspirativo" (285), showing a bias in his sweeping generalisation which is convenient for the faulty conclusion that all subversives must be dealt severe punishment. The Teniente announces that this punishment is to maintain white hegemony:

> Para acallar de una vez por todas las ínfulas de los criollos enemigos de la trata; para dominar la violencia de los esclavos que buscan destruir con terror y la fuga nuestro cristiano y buen orden; para detener el ascenso de pardos y morenos libres que tratan de igualarnos y ambicionan superarnos social y económicamente" e impone la necesidad de un fuerte escarmiento. (287)

This indicates that justice was blighted by a longstanding power struggle, and by fear and racial prejudice.

Still, Plácido's defiance in the face of death obfuscates the bid to label him as martyr. While his execution potentially serves to cement such status, it is the fact that he dies proclaiming his non-involvement in the conspiracy that leads one to be biased towards seeing him as innocent. If he is innocent, then he is not killed for something he actually did, and martyrs and heroes are hailed for the evidences of things they did, which are later absolved by history. Is there, then, a true premise on which history can seek to absolve Plácido? Ramsay argues that what Fulleda (and Sergio Giral, the filmmaker of the filmic version of *Plácido*) try to do is look beyond the uncertainty of his involvement in the conspiracy to highlight the larger significance of his transgressive presence in the era—the fact that there was some effort to help those marginally oppressed by Spain ("On Page" 232). In this respect, Plácido may be recognised not as a martyr of the conspiracy itself but surely a martyr of the struggle for Cuban nationhood.

Conclusion

The discourse of *mestizaje* exists both in practical and theoretical forms—in Peter Wade's own terms, as "ideology and lived experience." To marry this Hispanic discourse with its Anglophone equivalent, hybridity (as we come to understand it principally through Bhabha's lenses), is to activate a certain subversive potency that it cannot wield on its own due to the white colonial machinations that undergird it. Fulleda constructs in this brilliant historical piece, *Plácido*, an exemplary site for observation of racial, cultural, sexual, class, gender and nationhood politics in nineteenth-century Cuba. Fulleda allows for a contradictory, chaotic, complex and subversive view. Several characters clash with each other, even if they belong to the same race, class or gender; they spout varying ideologies that are inconsistent with their doings; they "negotiate" their subjectivities with each other through language and bodies, acting purely from self-interest. Plácido, the main character, is not the only but the most self-aware individual in the text, as he serves mainly as Fulleda's counter-voice for correcting official discourses of *mestizaje*. In this way, the play stands out as a highly subversive historical piece which is relevant for all racial discussions about Cuba, even today.

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