The Negro is Paid to Dance

Matilde E. López

Karin Killian

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol8/iss1/17
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Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

This rincón creativo is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol8/iss1/17
Art by Fernando Llort.

A Short Story by Matilde Elena López

Translated by Karin Killian Lima, Peru

This is the history of a sad man, or better put, the history of a sad Negro who is now sadder still. I feel in my heart as though I have been painted with pitch. I am drowning in a cesspool. I have been drowning since I was born.

One time I read -- or was it something I heard my mother say when I was young? -- Maybe it was she who read it to me. Regardless, it was something by Chesterton: "The tiger may free himself from his cage, but never from his spotted skin."

My mother cried a lot. Perhaps this is why I was born sad. One day she told me: "Everyone carries her drama within." I guessed what her’s was. But we don’t talk about that.

"My poor son," was all she said to me as I fell asleep.

"My little Eme, Eme, Oh! My Little Eme, Oh Eme!. Sleep tight my beautiful black baby. My little Eme, Eme!" She then sang to me as I slept on.

These were the only tender works I have known. I don’t know why but each year when Christmas comes around I have a premonition: something bad is going to happen to me.

Something bad, you ask?

Oh yes, all that has happened to me has been disastrous. But I always think that this will be something worse. I am one superstitious Negro. It comes from the oldest atavisms of my people and the fear too. I come from the jungle, this I know. But I don’t know where all the sadness within me comes from. Perhaps from my mother.

The only thing I remember about my father is a strong tall Jamaican who spoke only English. "British, British. Panama is of no importance to me," he used to say.

But to me, yes, it is important. Because it is my land. And the things that happen here pain me much. More than anything the things that happen in Chorillo, Marñón, Calidonia and San Miguel. The colored neighborhoods. The black muscles of the Canal Zone. I did not know what discrimination was until I had to go work at the Canal. It was then that they told me that we are race of hapless beings in this world of dollars. But I was telling you why Christmas scares me. It’s all because of one Christmas Eve, many years ago, when I was a sad young boy (because I was once a young boy, whether you believe it or not) and my mother helped me to trim a little pine branch. We were very poor, but I had been able to obtain many things, because I am both skillful and clever. That’s just how I am. My mother, poor woman, she was abandoned by my father and then went to live with another. He was a drunken carpenter, infamous. I helped her when I could. But he hated me.

"Bad little Negro," was what he always called me. Ay! I could bear it when he insulted me. But not when he hit my mother.

It was the day before Christmas, and I had arrived content to light the lights on the little Christmas tree. My drunken stepfather was discussing me with my mother.

This boy is bad. Bad!" He said. "I am going to kill him." My mother cried. didn’t dare enter. I just stood there, watching. But then I saw how he hit her, and how she fell to the floor. And then how he kicked her again still. I was blinded by my rage. That is all. I threw myself on top of him.

The Negro is Paid to Dance

The image on the right is from a stationary provided by Claudia Morales Baro.
“Run. Quick!” My mother screamed at me.

“Oh. So you want him to run quick, huh?” He screamed back. And he took a hammer that was close by and threw it at me, aiming for my head. I only remember that I saw many lights. And then everything went red and I fainted. They say that I bled a lot. And now you know why Christmas scares me. Later you will say that us Negros are superstitious and have many complexes.

Not long after that my mother died.

“Go to hell, you demon black boy,” my stepfather told me. And I went to the city. I wanted to look for what work there was. I was only twelve years old.

I don’t know if I have told you that I was born in a little village, and that that was where my mother died. To go to the Capital then was, well, an adventure. I did a little of everything. I cleaned cars. I sold things in the market. I dreamed of leaving on a big ship, of sailing around the world. I wanted to work as cargo labor, because I am strong! I did get aboard once, but they threw me off the job. In the capital I wandered about the bars, because at midnight the drunks no longer want the sandwiches, and I was able to get something to eat.

Later I went to the Canal Zone, to work as a porter on the wharf. This is the only thing us black men are good for. And it was then that I got to know her: the bad one. It seemed then like everything was made clear to me suddenly, that my life was going to change. They put us in a house. And I was able to get furniture on credit. She waited for me after work, and with her I learned to laugh. I even came to be happy. And I learned a sense of humor. Though sometimes something crossed me like a shadow. Made me serious. The laughter undid me.

“Why do you laugh like that?” She said to me. “It looks like your crying inside.”

We had everything then. We were content. And I took her out to dance at the carnivals. Us Negros have rhythm in our blood. And I was a demon dancing. A gringo saw me dancing in a cantina at the edge of the Canal Zone.

“My God!” said the gringo. “How you move. Would you like to dance in Happy Land?”

My luck had changed. They hired me there on the recommendation of just the one gringo. They gave me a white shirt and a black bow tie. And a straw hat like Maurice Chevalier’s, who I often imitated, and a cane. I danced and I laughed:

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!” It was long and sardonic outburst of laughter. And my teeth reverberated like the keys of a piano, like the keys of a piano that cried on the inside.


“What a wild nigger! He dances and exalts with the instinct of his sensual blood. What a Nigger, what a Nigger!” screamed the already drunk gringos.

And I was paid to dance and amuse the people. I didn’t have to carry enormous sacks on my shoulders anymore. My luck had improved indeed.

“You know we’re going to have a baby?” my woman said to me one day. And I took her in my arms and kissed her deeply. That was the happiest day of my life.

But said happiness could not last long. As I worked nights in Happy Land, my woman often had to stay alone. A gringo started coming around. He was a soldier from the zone; of the type who arrives, sets up camp and then goes out to look for an amusement to keep them busy until they return to their country. He liked my woman.

“You are one hot little mama,” he said one day, entering the house while I slept, tired.

My woman moved her hips when she walked, and liked to provoke. She put a colorful scarf on her head. It gave him pleasure to see her.

And here begins, my friends, the true history. When a woman says to a man: “I feel like I’ve known you forever. I love you so much.”

Though everyone repeats these words, one still think that it’s the truth and walks in the clouds. No, don’t think that I am going to begin to cry because my woman left me, because she went with the gringo that gave her a house with a lawn. No, ladies and gentlemen. I don’t care that she left! There are more than enough women in Panama. I only ache because of my son. He would have the same luck as I did in the hands of that gringo. I ache because he could not leave. What was I going to do with him? Little by little the woman was forgetting me.

Now, tell me if I don’t have an excuse. It was Christmas. I had to work all night at Happy Land. That night there were more drunk sailors than ever. It was ten O’clock. My number was scheduled for after midnight. A friend arrived, quite agitated. He didn’t know how to tell me.

“What news do you bring?” I chided him.

“Brother it’s bad... your son.”

“What? What happened to my son?”

“He’s there. Dead. They say the gringo killed him. The guy who lives with your girl.”

“What are you saying? It can’t be. Where is he? Are you drunk?”

“No, man, he’s dead.”

“And what about her? But... Why did the gringo go kill the boy?”

We raced out of there, quick as could be. In the street we heard the clamor of the crowd. It drove me mad.

“Lottery! Win the big one! Play tonight!”

“They’ve killed a Negro kid in El Límite.”


“Here comes Santa Claus!” You could hear the shouting of the little kids surrounding him.

“Brother!” my friend, who was still following me, shouted. “Wait for me!” And he tried to catch up with me.
But I didn’t hear a thing other than that same refrain hammering in my brain.

“They say that a gringo killed a little nigger boy.”

“Yes, my friends Yes. That gringo. The gringo who stole my woman from me. . . .”

In the bars, full of drunks, the zambos were fiery and lecherous.

“Sodom! Sodom!” I shouted.

“Prostitutes, Prostitutes!” I’m not sure if that was thought or screamed. It would have been the same.

“May you burn in hell for all eternity.”

“All women are prostitutes!” I was howling on the inside. “You all do not understand what has happened to me.”

The music resonated discordantly. Rock and Roll, Calypso, Merecumbe.


Please do excuse the confusion of this tale. All of my memories are crowding in. . . My son. . my son. My little boy with the glittering eyes like pacunes. The white of his eyes like the keys of a piano. And the white of his teeth, so white. Oh, and his useless hair, his shaved head. . . I ran like a crazy man. And near the house where my woman lived with the gringo I heard the screams.

“Ay! Ay! Ay. My son’s dead. Ay! Ay! Ay! He fell from there, from the top of the refrigerator. The poor thing.”

“Liar! Liar! The gringo killed him. Her man did it.”

“Ay! Ay! Little Eme, he fell from there. No! He didn’t do it. Not him.”


I could not get through. The whole world was shouting indignantly. I was just a choir of one sorrowful nigger. The street was teeming with people.

“What happened here? Let me see.”

“What’s going on? What’s the problem here?”

“Get him! Get him! Get him back!”

“They killed the boy.”

“No. He fell from the refrigerator.”

“It’s impossible to fall from the refrigerator.” I shouted as they started to close in on me, threateningly.

“Tell me the truth, you little bitch.”

“It was the gringo, the gringo did it.” I watched him anxiously. But nobody knew anything.

“Joseph, Joseph. You Gringo bastard!”

“Why would a man go and kill a child?”


“Gringo son of a bitch.”

“I say we lynch him. Lynch Him! In the US they lynch the niggers.”

“Okay! Okay! Move aside. Police!”

“What’s going on here? What happened?”

“The gringo killed the kid. He threw him against the wall and broke his skull.”

“No! No! It wasn’t him. My son, he fell from the refrigerator.”

“No, this gringo is evil. Hang him from the wire. He kicked him. He said that the kid looked like the nigger.”

“Just now, Sir, I mean today.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Speak clearly woman”

“Okay, Okay. The boy cut off a branch of pine for the Christmas tree, from that big tree there. The gringo got mad because he ruined the tree. And he pushed him against the wall.”

“Okay, Okay. You will need to come to the station and make a statement”

“You dirty slut. It would have better if you’d never been born.”

“You cheap nigger whore. You are the lowest level bitch.”

“Oh! Oh! Oh my god. Cried a Jamaican who had just come upon the throng of neighbors.

“This cannot be resolved like this!”

“They will prove the gringo innocent. You will see.”

“No. They will catch him. He ought to have gone to The Zone.”

“The governor of the Zone should hand him over.”

“The law of Panama will fail!”

“Calm down people. The government will reclaim the Canal Zone.”

“Yes, because the crime was committed here. When one of us does something there they judge us.”

I did not wait any longer. I ran to the Canal Zone. Lost, yet totally in control. I was disheartened but indignant. You all could not understand how I felt. I could not even understand it. I didn’t understand at all. I returned and hid in a bar. A friend came and found me there, and dragged me, almost by force, to Happy Land, where they were waiting for my show. I
was drunk. I dressed for the act and went out with the white suit, the straw hat, the baton and the little black bow tie.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Smile, nigger!"

"Dance, nigger! Dance now!"

"Look at how that colored boy moves, how he dances. He's like a possessed nigger."

"Look. It seems like the nigger is crying."

"Laugh, nigger. Laugh you little black Chaplin."

"Now imitate Chevalier."

"Dance! Dance! Go! Go! Go!"

"No. It's true. He's being niggardly. He smiles but it looks like he's crying."

"The nigger is drunk!"

"Get him off the stage! Get him out!"

Ladies and Gentlemen, There were just so many dreadful things racing through my mind. I remembered that other Christmas when my stepfather hit me over the head and I was left for dead. I could not escape the fear that Christmas Eve always brings. I knew that something bad was going to happen to me I remembered my mother crying on the floor. And all of these things where jumbled in my head, my poor head. I was there, dancing, drunk smiling and crying. And my outbursts of laughter were just endless sobs meant to entertain he gringos. While one gringo, at the other side of the zone, was seeking refuge after... My god! It wasn't possible! And I ran out of there screaming. And, naturally, they fired me.

"This nigger is crazy" said the owner of Happy Land.

"He drank a lot. He's a drunk."

"That's too bad because the nigger sure does dance well."

"Too bad, that poor nigger."

The end of the story, you already know. The gringo was detained in the Zone, that is true, but quickly, in something of a skirmish, he was lost. They didn't anything to him. They said that he ran way. How is it possible to escape a gringo jail? He was walking around in disguise while everyone forgot. And they fixed everything for him to escape. I followed the clues, and I went to my friends for help. They told me that they had seen him near the American Embassy, in his traveling uniform. He appeared to be very tranquil, ridiculing everything. The law. The pain that he had caused me. My immense tragedy.

In a moment that symbolized all of my disgrace, I pursued him. I went after him... despite of all the omens and complexes. What a man I am. Just like the gringo! Now there is nothing that matters to me. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I killed him. And then I went to my room, in Chorillo, to wait. The blows echoed.

"You stay detained," they told me.

And, actually, I was quite relieved. This is the whole story, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury. My lawyer says that I can save myself. That you, good Sirs, can declare me innocent. But it doesn't matter to me any more what happens. That night, when I killed the gringo I killed my whole past: the misery, my bad nigger's luck, my bastard stepfather, and the gringo who disgraced me. I was at peace. We are at peace, ladies and gentlemen.

What does it matter if a Negro spends the rest of his life in jail?

Karin Killian, with a BA in International Studies from DePaul University, is currently serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Peru. She met Dra. Matilde Elena Lopez while in El Salvador as part of a DePaul Foreign Study trip in 1997. She has remained in touch with Dra. Lopez and is at work on the complete translation of "Cartas a Groza." Contact her at karinkillian@yahoo.com

Matilde Elena Lopez: A Brief Biography By Karin Killian

"Todo mi vida se juega en el ano de 1944," Dra. Matilde Elena Lopez, a longtime professor at the National University of El Salvador and one of El Salvador's most renowned women of letters, explained recently, "De aqui nacieron los caminos, las decisiones, la lucha."

Born in San Salvador in 1922, Lopez was a young woman when she participated in the student movement which resulted in the termination of the regime of General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez in April of 1944. Her participation in this movement was anything but spontaneous. As the only female member of the prominent literary group known as "The Generation of 1944," Lopez helped plan the protests which eventually led to a coup d'état, and this event became the inspiration for a long and distinguished life of activism and literary excellence.

With more than 20 titles to her name, Lopez has a wise and distinguished literary voice which resonates with a clear and echoing intelligence rarely paralleled in any language. Lopez is not only a fine poet and story teller, but also a masterful social critic, and an energetic and accomplished educator. Her cultural labor has been recognized both in El Salvador and abroad. Many social and cultural organizations have bestowed distinctions and prizes upon her. Among these prizes stand out more than 10 first prizes in diverse classes which have been awarded during literary contests in Ecuador, Guatemala and El Salvador. And in 1973 Colombia University awarded her the Harper and Row Prize for Best Latin American short story.

Dra. Lopez is still writing. And she promises that the best is yet to come. Though her widely varied literary career has included short stories, poems and plays, she is still aiming for the elusive novel. "Writers cannot retire," Lopez says. "I was born with a vocation, without a doubt," she says. And there is no doubt indeed, that she will continue to pursue her vocation with a passionate fervor for many years still to come.