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"Ponernos el espejo por delante": Staging Race in Alejandro Tapia y Rivera's La cuarterona
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On a winter’s night in 1867, Alejandro Tapia y Rivera (1826-86) read his newly-published play La cuarterona to a select group of Spaniards and creoles in Madrid. Among the audience members was fellow Puerto Rican Eugenio María de Hostos (1839-1903), who, although better known for his role as a freedom fighter and pedagogue, was also a talented theatre critic. A few months later Hostos published an essay entitled “La cuarterona” in the Barcelona-based periodical Las Antillas, Revista Hispanoamericana (May 10, 1867). Curiously, although Hostos was obviously struck by the play’s bold theme of interracial romance – he states that the play “desenvuelve un pensamiento social de trascendencia” (75) and he celebrates “la elección del asunto que demuestra la posibilidad de un teatro americano con pensamientos, aspiraciones y fines distintos del de Europa” (76) – he never identifies the drama’s distinctively American theme as race.1 It is equally surprising, given the title of the piece, that instead of reviewing Tapia’s play, the essay develops a performance-focused theory of theatre that ultimately serves as a plea for the daring abolitionist drama to be staged. As we shall see, this oblique treatment of race is not only emblematic of the critical discourse surrounding La cuarterona, but also constitutes the play’s plot.
By insisting that only the sights and sounds of performance can convey the emotions of a drama and by describing how varying audiences, actors, and institutional contexts affect the reception of a play, Hostos characterizes theatre as a shared experience informed by extra textual circumstances. With regard to the text, Hostos writes that the intrinsic quality of drama is action and that discursively representing and reading action pales in comparison to witnessing it live (which is why he dares not write about Tapia’s play). In his opinion, “La fantasía más perspicaz, la fuerza representativa más pujante no lograrán jamás ver en las particularidades del estilo lo que ve en un ademán, lo que oye en una entonación la fantasía más débil” (76; my emphasis); moreover, the emotions provoked by a passive reading of a play are nothing like the “destello de la impetuosidad del sentimiento que os excitaría si vieran y escucharan los sentidos lo que percibe sutilmente vuestra alma” (76; my emphasis). In other essays, Hostos links live performance to nation building in the young Latin American republics. He argues that the aim of national theatres should be, first, to enable an audience to recognize itself as a representative body politic and, second, to instruct this collective body: “¡Cuántas benignas correcciones y saludables lecciones y útiles insinuaciones y estimulantes enseñanzas, podíamos deber a una dramática que se propusiera por fin educativo el ponernos el espejo por delante!” (“De teatro” 129). In Hostos’s writings on theatre, whether he is advocating that the theatre shape a collective consciousness by means of staging storylines and embodied practices that audiences will recognize as their own, or simply contemplating the transformation of drama into theatre, the recurrent theme of seeing and hearing constitutes a subtext, that, in my view, bears an unexpected relation to the representation of race in Tapia’s play.

Hostos’s conception of theatre invites speculation on the cultural field of the Metropolis and its two remaining colonies during the last third of the nineteenth century and on what was at stake in writing and staging La cuarterona in this context. My reading of the play examines the representation of mulatto identity, a racial location, according to José F. Buscaglia-Salgado, “in the coloniality of power that alludes to the offspring of Europeans and Africans, or their descendents” (xvii). Borrowing the phrase “coloniality of power” from sociologist Aníbal Quijano, Buscaglia-Salgado (xii) uses the term in his study of mulatto identity in the colonial Spanish Caribbean to refer to a distribution of power that is determined by racial social classification. In line with foundational scholars of colonialism such as Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi, the coloniality of power recognizes racism as “the fundamental relation which unites colonialist and colonized” (Memmi 70). Buscaglia-Salgado’s project uncovers in the historical record “mulataje,” a movement or process by which the mulatto subject and the mulatto body politic, “as sites of convergence of and resistance to precisely that which the coloniality of power attempts to keep apart” (xiv) destabilizes the European (white) racial Ideal. The first part of this article therefore
considers the colonial background in which La cuarterona was produced and examines some of the institutions, conventions, and discourses that determined what was permissible for audiences to see and hear on stage, particularly with regard to emerging discourses of collective identity.

Critics have tended to approach La cuarterona by writing it into the narrative of Puerto Rican theatre history and highlighting its unique mixture of romantic, neoclassic, and realist aesthetic features. Reading Tapia's text in its relation with anti-slavery novels Sab (1841) by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda and Cecilia Valdés (1882) by Cirilio Villaverde, however, allows themes such as unknown origins, the tragic mulatta, the culture of passing, incest, and doomed interracial love to come into sharper focus, yielding a deeper reading of the operations of race in Tapia's drama, a text that, unlike the abolitionist novels, was meant to be performed before a live audience. In La cuarterona, the visual, what the characters (and the audience) can and cannot see, and the verbal, who tells what to whom, remind us how the power "which permits one to act upon the actions of others" (Foucault, "Subject" 223) rests on a system of differentiations determined, among other categories, by status, race, gender, and knowledge. This is particularly relevant to the colonial Spanish Caribbean, a society — although organized by racial castes that legally set apart free people of color and slaves from whites — in which miscegenation made racial difference increasingly invisible. In the play, Julia, the white-in-appearance heroine, tranquilly forms part of an aristocratic white household. Her race becomes an issue when her benefactor's son declares his love for her, and the dramatic tension hinges on the concealment and revelation of the secret of the near-white heroine's origins and the characters' (and audience's) desire to see/listen to the truth.

TAPIA, THEATRE, AND MODERNITY

In his 1978 essay "Literatura e identidad nacional en Puerto Rico" José Luis González notes that Tapia's condemnation of slavery "revela una percepción de las consecuencias que tuvo ese sistema para todo el cuerpo social puertorriqueño que todavía echamos de menos en muchos de los historiadores y sociólogos puertorriqueños de hoy" (60). Tapia's place at the origins of Puerto Rican literature has been the subject of a debate that I shall not reiterate here other than to highlight González's point that, of the two literary spokesmen cited as founders of Puerto Rican letters, the worldview embodied in Tapia's works is progressive and cosmopolitan while that of Manuel Alonso is traditional and costumbrista (59). Regardless of their differing approaches to literature, the fact is, González maintains, that

la literatura nacional fue fundada por señoritos (o, para decirlo en criollo, por 'blanquitos'). Sólo que esos 'blanquitos' representaban, en su momento, el sector más progre-
sista de la sociedad puertorriqueña, el único que podía empezar a impugnar la dependencia colonial en el terreno de la cultura. (44)

Tapia’s modernizing views, like those of other intellectuals of the incipient creole bourgeoisie, were constructed within colonial discourse, and, as such, do not represent univocal positions. One of the first questions that arises when studying La cuarterona, for example, is why Tapia, deeply concerned with problems in Puerto Rican society, side-steps the tricky topic of race in his own island by setting his play in Cuba. This, plus the fact that Tapia was the son of a Spanish military officer, that much of his work was inscribed in European literary conventions, and that he never explicitly aligned himself with the cause for independence, explains why some might label his politics as conservative. I argue, however, that Tapia’s choice of setting reflects the cosmopolitan quality of Puerto Rican liberal reformism, as well as the theatre practices of his time.

Tapia formed part of a group of creole intellectuals whose cultural and political activities created a discursive space from which to communicate liberal reformist ideals during the last third of the nineteenth century in Puerto Rico, a period of intense political activity that included a nationalist uprising (El Grito de Lares) in 1868, political and economic colonial reform, the establishment of the first national political parties, and the abolition of slavery (1873). Silvia Álvarez Curbelo observes that this group was notable for attempting to found a country “sin el sello de la rebelión, desde el cambio cultural, movidos por el protagonismo, a menudo no confesado pero no por ello menos operante, de los intelectuales y de su irreprimible afán de modernidad” (24). Abolition, economic modernization and cultural progress constituted the three central discourses that these liberal reformists employed in imagining a modern, enlightened citizenry – a body politic not necessarily defined by the creation of a nation state. Rather than founding liberty on republicanism, writes Curbelo, these intellectuals understood modernity as

la ciudadanía cosmopolita de la que hablaba Kant: la libertad de los ilustrados, la libertad de una sociedad, de una polis liberada del despotismo, la arbitrariedad y las rúmoras del esclavismo, el proteccionismo y la ignorancia. Se entendió, en gran medida, como el acceso al mundo, mediante una conversión intelectual, mediante la apertura de las comunicaciones y los circuitos de lectura y viaje. El arbitrio y el atraso representaron, más que el colonialismo, los dos grandes males que aquejaban al país. (67)

In Mis memorias o Puerto Rico como lo encontré y como lo dejo (1928), Tapia’s acute awareness of place expresses these enlightened ideals. While the title of his memoirs makes patent the link between the story of Tapia’s life and the narrative of his country and he states on more than one occasion that he loves Puerto
Rico, one notes the colonial discourse of inferiority in the creole intellectual's yearning for modernity:

Hubiera preferido nacer en un país con menos contras que éste, verbigracia: menos murallones para mi ciudad nativa: mejores caminos y más escuelas: más luces y menos faroles o faroleros en toda la insula, con algo menos del yo lo mando cuando se trata del Mal y del yo no puedo cuando el Bien. (*Mis memorias* 18)

If, as Tapia argued, Puerto Rico's cultural and economic insularism was the result of a pernicious political system based on absolutism and slavery, then the elimination of these institutions and "la más amplia ilustración" (*Mis memorias* 102) could place Puerto Rico on the path to modernity.

Like many of his reformist peers, and in spite of limited personal resources, travel to the metropolitan centre was essential to Tapia's development of a cosmopolitan worldview. Exile in Spain, Tapia's punishment for dueling with a Spanish soldier, ironically afforded him extensive exposure to liberal politics. While in Madrid, he met Cuban abolitionist Domingo del Monte, who encouraged his writing "con lisonjeras frases y cariñosos consejos" (*Mis memorias* 183); he met freely with fellow Puerto Ricans to discuss what they identified as the island's most pressing issues, the abolition of slavery and of laws relating to racial purity (*Mis memorias* 182-83); and he contributed to creating a consciousness of national identity by writing a Puerto Rican legend, *La palma del cacique* (1852) and gathering Puerto Rican historical documents he later published as his *Biblioteca histórica de Puerto Rico* (1854). That is, while his companions had the privilege to pursue a formal education and form a professional class that would lead Puerto Rico politically into new terrain, through his cultural projects Tapia also imagined a collective identity distinct from Spain. Although this intellectual vanguard embraced varying positions concerning Puerto Rico's future political relationship with Spain — autonomy, assimilation, and separation — abolition became a common discourse without which most liberal reformers could hardly envision a modern future.

In *La cuarterona* art and politics come together, and this is all the more evident if we recall the context in which Tapia wrote the play. It was completed during a visit to Spain in 1867, just as the abolitionist debate intensified. In October 1866, the Crown at long last invited Puerto Rican and Cuban representatives to a *Junta informativa* (1866-67) to discuss special laws promised in 1837 that were to reform the composition and scope of local administration. Defying the agenda set by the Crown, José Julián Acosta and Segundo Ruiz Belvis, along with Francisco Mariano Quiñones, presented "one of the most enlightened documents in Puerto Rican history" (González Vales 109), *Proyecto para la abolición*, which called for the immediate abolition of slavery with or without indemnification to the owners. Álvarez Curbelo (123) cites the reports produced
during the *Junta informativa* as the platform that constructed a Puerto Rican national imaginary based on civic equality and the modernization of economic structures, education, and social mores. *La cuarterona* can be read as a parallel founding text, because it implicitly, if not explicitly, expresses all these desires, although I would argue that Tapia’s play projects an identity discourse constituted in more regional terms than national ones. Moreover, Tapia’s play was written to be performed before a live audience, an experience that provided a unique mode of developing a collective consciousness. Ann Pelligrini, for example, writes that performance bolsters a sense of identity by providing a space and time from which to view things from a different perspective: “we’ (the collective and collaborative ‘we’ of writer and reader, performer and audience) can only catch ourselves in the act of becoming subject when we see ourselves as if through the other’s ‘I.’ Theatrical, cinematic, and textual scenes of identification restage that other scene, but with a critical distance built in” (11).

The longing for modernity that motivated the cultural and political projects of Tapia and his contemporaries enabled a newly imagined sense of community, one that was not automatically envisioned as culminating in a nation state. Their work, in many ways, produced what Jürgen Habermas has called the public sphere, a “public opinion” distinct from, and eventually supplanting, monarchy and the aristocracy. Like the civil and religious wars in eighteenth-century Europe, the wars of independence in nineteenth-century Latin America drew private individuals together to act in the interest of what was defined as “public opinion,” forming a new sphere of interaction with absolutist state power. This change was apparent in literature and cultural institutions – literary salons, academic societies, newspapers and novels, and as I argue here, the theatre – which served as forums of discussion in which private individuals joined together to form a “public” that constructed itself as an alternative source of authority to that of the Crown. Benedict Anderson similarly notes the decline of dynastic rule and the rise of new print technology in the eighteenth century as contributing factors to the emergence of the modern nation. For Habermas, the new flow of periodicals and fiction created a space for public rational-critical debate, while for Anderson they made it possible for large numbers of people to know of one another indirectly, creating communities of readers who imagined themselves residing in a common time and place, united by a vernacular language.

Tapia, who wrote significant works in all genres, contributed to the key rational-critical debate of his time, the abolition of slavery, through the vehicle of theatre. The theatre’s role in the public sphere and its contribution to nation building has been undervalued, particularly in Latin American literary studies, where narrative and poetry have been the dominate areas of scholarly investigation. The theatre event might be seen as a privileged site in the public sphere, since it represents an arena of sociability where ideas are discussed similar to
the salons, pubs, or coffeehouses cited by Habermas, as well as a contributor to print culture in the sense that in addition to the dramatic text, it enters into print culture via criticism in newspapers and other publications. The performance of a play, though a temporary event, heightens an awareness of community because it provides a topic to engage the attention of a group. In addition to assembling a body of people who may have otherwise never been in close proximity to one another, it supplies a common ground for a discussion that could be divisive or integrative. In the theatre, even though most spectators will not come to know one another, the auditorium brings them together as an audience in a concrete time and place, making Anderson's imagined community of the nation less anonymous.

For this reason, I find Tapia's gesture of broaching the topic of race in the theatre to be so significant. On one level, as the Greek and Latin etymologies of theatre (a place for viewing) and auditorium (a place for hearing) remind us, the theatre is a site wherein live bodies are called upon to see and listen to performers onstage.\(^\text{10}\) In the case of La cuarterona, in which concealing and revealing racial heritage constitutes a central theme, audience members must have been caught in an uncomfortable specular drama. In a broader sense, engaging with race through performance also raises the question of collective identity. As theatre historian Marvin Carlson writes, romantic drama played an important part in the development of modern nationalism and was used "as a powerful tool for awakening a people to a common heritage and, not infrequently, encouraging them through an awareness of this heritage to seek both national identity and national liberty in opposition to the demands of dominant and external political and cultural influences" (152). While politically Tapia may have represented a rather accommodating liberal reformism because he did not advocate a violent separation from Spain, the racial theme in La cuarterona reveals his anticolonialism. The play affirms cultural difference by recognizing mulataje as a central component of Caribbean culture, and by opposing slavery Tapia takes a stand against one of the chief institutions that sustained Spain's colonial power.

**SECRETS AND LIES: THE OPERATIONS OF RACE IN LA CUARTERONA**

If La cuarterona served as Tapia's artistic contribution to the abolitionist debate, then the Puerto Rican author's pre-abolition public reading of the play in Madrid appears to have had the effect of winning the partisan hearts and minds that Doris Sommer describes as one of the objectives in romantic novels in which the unions between lovers representative of different social, racial, or regional groups represent "foundational fictions" that envision certain constructions of collective identity. Two Spanish sisters in attendance that evening were so moved that Tapia was inspired to write in their copy of the play the following dedication: "He oído a unos bellos labios expresar que cuando los ojos azules
lloran, parece que llora el cielo. Si esto es así, puede decir, que, gracias a éste mi modesto drama, he visto llorar a cuatro cielos, y por cierto muy hermosos" (quoted in García Díaz 139). One of the sisters was doña Rosario Díaz y Espiau, Tapia's future wife. In a speech honoring Tapia, his good friend José Julián Acosta concretizes the event's fateful romantic outcome: "Me represento ahora al vivo aquella noche inolvidable de Madrid, en que leyendo Tapia ante una reunión selecta de damas y caballeros uno de sus más sentidos dramas, La cuarterona, encontró allí un corazón y una inteligencia capaces de comprenderlo, y de unir para siempre su porvenir al suyo, a la señorita doña Rosario Díaz y Espiau" (quoted in Tapia, Mis memorias 254). It would seem that in Spain, Tapia's tragic drama won both a heart and another ally for the abolitionist cause.

The play, set in the 1860s, begins as Carlos returns home to Cuba from his medical studies in Paris. While away, he and his childhood companion, Julia, realize that they love each other. Their potential relationship is problematic since Julia is the illegitimate daughter of a mulatta slave and has been raised, thanks to the charity of Carlos's mother, in the same household. In his absence, the Condesa has arranged for Carlos to marry Emilia, the daughter of a nouveau riche Spanish merchant, don Crispulo. For the Condesa, the marriage represents economic salvation as they are on the brink of financial ruin, while don Crispulo stands to gain an aristocratic title. From the beginning, Julia dreads Carlos's return because she is resigned to her "condición," her social and racial standing, and accepts that she could never marry a white aristocrat. Carlos, in contrast, embodies liberal reformism and, bolstered by a cosmopolitan world-view and religious discourse that exposes the hypocrisy of racial prejudice, he is willing to defy his mother and flee with Julia to a place where such "mezquinas preocupaciones coloniales" (753) do not exist. When all parties involved discover their secret love, in romantic fashion Julia faints and soon comes down with a fever. Carlos plots to escape with his delirious lover, but his manipulative mother, desperate to impede their union, lies and announces that Carlos and Julia are brother and sister. Horrified by the prospect of committing incest, Carlos marries Emilia in a ceremony that Julia, in her delirium, imagines as her funeral. She, in fact, dies soon afterward, upon taking an overdose of the very medicine that was to alleviate her fever. In the aftermath of the tragedy, the family's faithful servant Jorge unmasks the Condesa's lie and shocks everyone by disclosing that don Crispulo is Julia's true father.

Who, besides the small group of Spaniards and creoles in Madrid, who only attended a dramatic reading of the play, saw this scandalous story play out on stage? Ideally, Habermas’s public sphere represented an egalitarian space where social inequalities were bracketed and open rational-critical debate could take place (among the bourgeois male heads of households who formed the "public" voice). As for the theatre, although celebrated by Hostos as "el único género literario que está al alcance de todo el mundo" ("De teatro" 126), it is...
unlikely that the theatre performed in playhouses in the nineteenth century Spanish Caribbean was accessible to a wide cross section of social sectors, although it did attract a mixed-gender crowd. In addition, the political vicissitudes of the Crown ensured that in the colonies the freedom of speech and the right to assembly, two preconditions of the public sphere, were never guaranteed. The government tended to view the public discussion of new ideas as a threat to Spanish authority, thus censorship, enforced by civil and religious authorities or self-imposed, was a constant feature of intellectual life during the colonial period.13 Ironically, don Juan de la Pezuela, a governor who cited the dangers of education in the colonies, was one of Puerto Rico’s first advocates of the theatre. In his double role as theatre devotee and governor, Pezuela not only founded La Sociedad Conservadora del Teatro Español but also established a policy on theatre censorship in his infamous Bando de policía y buen gobierno of 1849. Tapia knew firsthand how censorship, “tan meticulosa y ridicula” (Mis memorias 114) operated. An earlier version of his historical-themed romantic play Robert D’Evereux, which became in 1856 the first play by a Puerto Rican to be staged on the island, had been censored for portraying overly humanized kings. We do not have an account of Tapia’s experience with staging La cuarterona in Puerto Rico because he died before completing his memoirs. Tapia’s son, however, shared with theatre historian Emilio Pasarell a copy of the play containing a note that indicates that censors read the work carefully. In the note, dated July 30, 1878, the censor requested that in the quote cited above (from act 3, scene 6), the word “coloniales” be substituted by “sociales” (quoted in Pasarell 173).

Censorship may explain why La cuarterona did not receive the full staging in Madrid Hostos alluded to in his essay and why it was not performed in Puerto Rico until after slavery was abolished, a full decade after Tapia wrote the play. Even then, and still today, race represents a complex and explosive topic in Puerto Rico. As Edgar Quiles (19) suggests in his prologue to the play, censorship may have been a factor in setting the dramatic action in Cuba rather than in Puerto Rico. Or perhaps writing about Cuba was a way to deflect some of the criticism of racial prejudice aimed at Puerto Ricans (if this was Tapia’s intended audience). In my view, however, the play speaks to both islands, because, as the aforementioned example of text editing suggests, the play was perceived as critical of colonialism and thus would have been censored in either colony, regardless of where the action was set. Emilio Pasarell and Roberto Ramos-Perea imply that Tapia did not use a Puerto Rican setting because he was never interested in writing “Puerto Rican” theatre (five of his six plays are set in Europe).14 Tapia’s memoirs and lectures on literary aesthetics do affirm that he was clearly an aficionado of European theatre; however, given his interest in local politics, his investment in building culture in Puerto Rico, and his work in other genres on Puerto Rican themes, I suspect that Tapia’s “Europeanized” dramatic oeuvre
does not only expose the mindset of a colonial intellectual, but that it also reflects the public nature of the theatre event and its vulnerability to censorship. Finally, Tapia’s biographer explains the play’s Cuban setting in such a way that helps to mythologize Puerto Rico’s supposed lack of racial discrimination by insinuating that the problem “no existía con caracteres tan alarmañes como en la hermana Antilla” (García Díaz 142). In fact, Tapia was very familiar with Cuban society given that he wrote the play after an extended period of working there (1857-62), but most critics, including myself, agree that the play clearly resonates with the politics of race in Puerto Rico and many other parts of the Americas as well.

Aníbal González similarly states that the play “obviously had to take place in a medium where racial intolerance was the norm,” and that Tapia “with few modifications” (52) could have set it in Puerto Rico. Tapia’s reasons for setting it in Havana, according to González (52), are historical: titles of nobility were much more common in the wealthier island of Cuba, thus the play’s theme of social climbing fit more logically in a Cuban milieu. Under Spanish rule, both Cuba and Puerto Rico, notwithstanding important socioeconomic and demographic differences in how slavery developed there, produced social systems based on racial castes. In the play, the plot line involving the search for social status runs parallel to the love story doomed by racial prejudice until the two stories collide at the end of the play. This added layer shows Tapia’s enlightened objection to any form of arbitrary placement at birth in a particular social status. That is, by including the issue of hereditary nobility, La cuarterona makes a case for freedom and equality for blacks and whites, creoles and Spaniards.

The history of the play’s authorship and performance suggests that in its original conception, La cuarterona was not a “national” play and that it only later came to form part of the Puerto Rican repertoire often used for nationalist purposes. Tapia was a Puerto Rican liberal reformist who probably conceived of his controversial play in Cuba and finished writing it in Spain, where it was first read to a mixed audience from Europe and the Americas. When the play finally premièred in San Juan a decade later, it was performed by the Cuban theatre company of Eugenio Astol and José Moratín de Prado. The play’s implicit audience was broad-based, which suited the theatrical activity of this time, since most plays staged were foreign and often performed by traveling companies from Europe and other parts of Latin America. In the final analysis, written and performed in a period in which many liberal creole intellectuals and a good number of radical revolutionaries were imagining collective identities separate from Spain, Tapia surely had in mind both a metropolitan and colonial audience for his play.

Although Tapia’s play might have successfully “romanced” his Spanish wife and other audience members in Madrid, the play itself posits a number of ill-fated Caribbean love matches that lend themselves to an allegorical projec-
tion of proto-national identities. As in Cecilia Valdés and Sab in which arranged marriages serve to solidify the power, wealth, and racial exclusivity of a vulnerable upper class, Carlos and Emilia’s marriage strengthens the wealthy minority by joining noble blood with the material wealth of the ascendant bourgeoisie. In all three works, the formalized matches are bound by interest and lies whereas the potential cross-racial unions represent true passions that would have brought together different classes and races in a union that represents the consolidation of a new society. Through these failed romances the authors suggest that political maturity – autonomy or independence from Spain – is impossible as long as the colonial institution of slavery and system of racial castes divide the populace. In addition, the third romantic possibility Tapia offers in his play, between Emilia and Luis, Carlos’s afrancesado friend, is discredited as imitative and inauthentic, hardly the base for building a national identity. In contrast to Carlos who has returned from abroad prepared to contribute to a new professional class, Luis shows no such commitment to his country. Emilia and Luis’s shared affinity for all things material might blossom into love, but Luis’s main motivation in marrying is to acquire enough capital to return to Paris. Through Luis’s affected language peppered with French, Emilia’s frivolity and susceptibility to bribes, and don Crispido’s almost ingenuous opportunism, the play parodies social climbers and distances the audience from any identification with such positions.

The matrimonial machinations of don Crispulo and the Condesa hardly cast them in a positive light either. On an allegorical level, matchmaking invites audiences to envision different formulations of collective identity, but Tapia also uses the theme of matrimony to criticize concrete social realities in the nineteenth-century Spanish Caribbean. In her study of marriage in nineteenth-century Cuba, Verena Martinez-Alier writes that “Marriage patterns, family structure, and kin relationships, far from being natural facts, were sociopolitical constructs responding to the political interests of the colonial government coupled with the ingrained racism characteristic of a slave society” (xiii). In a futile attempt to maintain the Spanish ideal of racial purity – limpieza de sangre – the Crown constructed an intricate caste system of social stratification along racial lines that, in the Caribbean, placed the Spaniards on top, the largely mixed-race free people of color in the middle, and African slaves at the bottom. But in the period portrayed in Tapia’s play, the 1860s, the free colored and slave population was almost equal to the number of whites in both Cuba and Puerto Rico, and there was a certain amount of racial mobility that allowed people of color to join the ranks of whites.17 This demographic reality, along with the specter of the Haitian Revolution, created anxiety for white slave owners.

This is particularly the case for someone like don Crispulo, whose social aspirations are motivated by doubts about his own origins: “¿Sé por ventura quiénes fueron los primeros de mi apellido que hubo en el mundo?” (72o).18 Al-
though don Crispulo is a Spaniard and thus occupies the position of the colonizer, his actions suit the behavior of the colonized, and he embodies one of the threats of colonial mimicry described by Homi Bhabha, a concept I shall explore more fully in connection to the character Julia.19 We see how don Crispulo is a mimic man who openly emulates Spaniards of higher stations when he tells the Condesa that his madrileño friend bought him the expensive false medals decorating his “costume” (731) and when he states his desire to “encondarme o enmarquesarme para que olviden que vine a América como polizón” (721). Tapia satirizes both the practice of buying titles and the obsession with racial purity when don Crispulo boasts that he could buy such titles as “Conde de Bemba” (a Bantu language) or “Marqués de la Macagua” (a Taíno word for an indigenous Cuban tree), but rejects such lineages as too new and “dark” in favor of becoming “Conde de la Edad Media” (722) by marrying into a family with a name that evokes old Spain. Written with an audience made up of the privileged classes in mind, through don Crispulo (and to some extent the titled but soon-to-be poor Condesa) Tapia’s play signals the hypocrisy of vilifying people of color who pass as white when so many social climbers become “passers” as well. While it would seem that in the colonial hierarchy a Spanish “passer” like don Crispulo is not particularly threatening to the colonial order, “what is being set in motion in their behavior” argue Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffins, “is something that may ultimately be beyond the control of colonial authority” (141). As we shall see, in this culture of passing, the mixed-race social actor was perceived as much more dangerous.

In colonial society, arranged, endogamous marriages were one mechanism by which to protect principal families and important leadership posts from “impure” blood. Neither Carlos nor Emilia are able to choose their partners (or desist from marrying at present, which is Emilia’s wish), and the only gauge by which they are judged as properly educated, “good” children is whether they obey their parents. Similar to Gómez de Avellaneda in Sab, Tapia links the institution of marriage to slavery by highlighting matrimony as an economic transaction.20 The parents/owners are complicit in the colonial project, while their children/slaves struggle to define themselves differently. For Carlos and Emilia, their marriage constitutes another form of slavery. When the racist and patronizing Emilia asserts that she enjoys the freedom of being unmarried, her normally indulgent father exercises his patriarchal power and explains that all women, regardless of social standing, have no say in their destiny. Carlos, for his part, believes that the spoiled and capricious Emilia’s idea of acquiring a husband is akin to buying a slave. When his mother points out that reason should determine choice of marriage partners, and that Emilia is beautiful, wealthy, and docile, Carlos counters that he prefers a love match with a woman of virtue and intelligence. Their opposing views of marriage represent a significant conflict since, “the ideal of love as a prerequisite for marriage constituted a
permanent potential challenge to the opposite ideal of racial purity in a multiracial society” (Martinez-Alier xiii). What is more, Carlos’s willingness to break with societal norms and elope with Julia embodies an enlightened ethos of equality, individualism, and freedom of choice, the existence of which made it impossible for the slave system to be regarded as the legitimate order of things (Martinez-Alier 136). Awareness of the essential illegitimacy of the slave regime, in turn, fed into the elite’s fears that slave rebellions and the abolitionist cause could at any time destroy this order. In the play, as in the historical reality of the 1860s and 1870s, rebellion thus far has failed, but the play’s final visual images of Carlos rejecting his mother’s embrace and kneeling alongside Julia’s corpse, of Emilia’s and Crispulo’s expressions of shame and terror, and most importantly, of the Condesa alone, slumped in a chair, in conjunction with the play’s last words, significantly voiced by a black servant – “Dios hará justicia” (772) – portend a change in power relations.

Interracial unions provoked fears among the upper classes because they blurred boundaries between whites and non-whites, rich and poor, and legitimacy and illegitimacy. The play’s representation of mulatto identity may have made its nineteenth-century audience anxious as well, because it forced spectators to consider their own racial identifications. In particular, one wonders whether the mixed-race spectator identified with the characters of color or chose to pass as white. Adopting a racial identity with which to identify reveals race as a subjective social construct. While I do not suggest that Tapia anticipated racial constructivism, the two characters of color in his play help expose the instability of racial categories. A mixed-race character like Julia, who has the ability to masquerade as white, foregrounds race as performance. This is made even more evident in theatre, where paradoxical signifiers such as costume and makeup serve to mark difference but, in spite of themselves, also draw attention to how identities are “put on.” Following the play, for example, a note instructs that while the actress who plays Julia should have dark, wavy hair (naturally or dyed), she should not darken her face “puesto que se trata de una mujer blanca en apariencia” (773). There is, therefore, a double layer of ambiguity in which the fictional racial identity points to the fiction of “real” racial identities. That is, if characters in the play such as Emilia fear that some of their contemporaries pass as white, does the audience in turn speculate on the racial background of the actors and spectators who also “play” these identities? Unambiguous is the fact that actors with phenotypes that marked them as people of color were not included in select traveling theatre companies such as Astol Prado. Consequently, although there is no mention of the use of blackface, the stage directions instruct that the actor who plays Jorge, “llevará peluca, figurando el cabello negro y lanudo de su raza; pero algo canoso” (773). In sum, when there is an apparently white actress playing a white-in-appearance mixed-blood character and an apparently white actor playing a black character, race becomes
unhinged from the body (biology) and emerges as a mask (ideology). But as we have seen in the theme of marriage, Tapia’s play not only points to race as a social construction, it also envisions race as materially rooted in institutional structures and cultural practices as well.

Julia’s mixed-race body incarnates a history that also has the potential to make spectators uncomfortable. Simply putting the spotlight on a racially-mixed character is significant when one compares La cuarterona to an abolitionist novel such as Cecilia Valdés that narrates multiple generations of interracial sexual liaisons and extensive scenes that describe the horrors of slavery. Due to theatrical conventions (such as the necessity of a compact plot and the question of decorum) and censorship issues, no such details enter the frame of the theatre. It is therefore important to unpack the meaning of Julia’s racialized body, to read in it the story that is not seen on stage. Symbolically, mixed-blood characters often represent myths of origins and are identified with the past, or alternatively they incarnate a new amalgamate identity that is associated with the future.21 Given the tragic outcome of the play’s interracial romance, Tapia seems to suggest that without abolition, it is not viable to imagine a utopian “nuestra América mestiza” without racial difference, as did José Martí, post-abolition, in his essay “Nuestra América” (1891). Instead, through Julia, he recalls the violent origins of a colonial society that continues to be imprisoned by unenlightened racial attitudes and sexual values. In this society, descendants of slaves were associated with the taboos of infamy and illegitimacy (Martínez-Alier 132). Incest, too, enters into the notion of the “impurity” of the interracial person when the fear of miscegenation becomes conflated with the fear of the incestuous mixing of blood to form one, overpowering taboo (Sollors 287). Consequently, even though Julia by appearance is white and has received an advantaged upbringing, she is always defined by the cuarterón of black blood in her veins and cannot escape the taint of being the daughter of a mulatto slave who was sold by an owner shamed by her pregnancy. As beautiful, good, and spiritually pure as she may be, she is unable to marry her noble suitor because of her impure racial background. Consequently, she bears all the traits of the “tragic mulatto” stereotype and is “sad, melancholy, resigned, self-sacrificing, or suicidal” (Sollors 240).

Julia’s predicament is the public knowledge of her origins. As don Crispulo admits, she very well may have been able to marry someone like Carlos had her origins remained a secret. Simply knowing Julia’s secret constitutes a method of disciplining her racialized body. Since she is white in appearance, as long as she does not do anything that might challenge societal norms, no one has reason to call attention to her race. Julia states: “En general, los de mi clase la niegan o la disimulan; yo no lo publico, pero Dios me ha dado una compensación: la conformidad, y por eso manifiesto mi condición sin humillarme” (695). Because of her open secret, Julia lives under surveillance in a panopticon, as though on a
backlit stage “in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible” (Foucault, Discipline 200). The weight of public opinion and the assumption that she is being watched at all times lead Julia to internalize self-discipline and to isolate her from forming any sort of supportive alliance with her peers: “Ellas tienen galanes, amigas, y yo... no tengo una sola amiga” (735). Julia’s quiet conformity contrasts with don Crispulo’s flagrant mimicry and highlights what Bhabha identifies as the ambivalence of mimicry, “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (86). On the one hand, she exemplifies regulation and discipline, mimicry in the sense that as long as she is constructed as almost the same but not quite (white), she remains a recognizable and controllable other. But on the other hand, assuming, even passively, the role of the white creole constitutes a repetition with a difference which re-articulates a presence in terms of its otherness and potentially unsettles the power relations between the colonizer and the colonized.

Charity also produces submission. When the Condesa reminds Julia that under her care she has always been treated with kindness, Julia is compelled to repress her love for Carlos and to aid the Condesa in forcing him to marry Emilia. Julia is so thoroughly “disciplined” by her charitable indebtedness that she tells Carlos that if he really loved her he would not threaten the invisibility that conformity affords her: “¡Ah! Usted ni me ama tanto como dice: usted quiere que mi bienhechora me dé en rostro con mi triste condición” (695). Julia’s greatest fear is realized when Emilia underscores her power by calling her a mulata, an illocutionary act that affirms what everyone already knows, that also has the perlocutionary effect of enforcing Julia’s passivity (Julia immediately faints). Like the scene described by Fanon in which a child cries “Look, a Negro” (112), Emilia gains control by incorporating Julia’s body into a system of racialized meanings. Similarly, the stain, the metaphorical racial marker that Julia insists burns on her brow in her delirious, dying state, is only made perceptible when referenced verbally: “Una mancha que debe ser muy visible, porque todos la ven, todos me la echan en la cara. ¡Cuando todos lo dicen!” (765).

Julia, in contrast, does not have the power to speak, partly because she is a woman, but mainly because of her mixed blood. Tapia draws attention to her inability to voice any sort of criticism of society by assigning Carlos all of the speeches that denounce the injustices of slavery and by limiting much of her rational speech to soliloquies only heard by the audience and to delirious babble, some of which contains, says Jorge, “palabras que no hemos podido comprender” (743). Because her vocal and physical presence on stage is muted, Julia’s stage presence can be described as ghostly. Her silence and whiteness is spectral, that is, dangerous, unmarked, and hard to “see,” which explains why, in attempt to regulate her, so much discussion is generated about her. Other than her soliloquies (remember that she has no female confidant), she inter-
venes on stage in brief dialogues with Carlos, the Condesa, and Jorge, but she is absent from the key group scenes that affect her destiny (Carlos and Emilia's engagement party and wedding, for example). In the third act, she wanders around the house, Ophelia-like, pale and feverish. These mechanisms that serve to stage Julia's isolation are important because they present audiences with images that heighten the spectator's awareness of the operations of race in seeing and being seen, speaking and being spoken to.

Everyone knows where Julia's black blood comes from, but no one seems curious about her paternal origins. Julia's white appearance, the product of two generations of miscegenation, should pique the conscience of audience members and remind them of the not very secret practice of white slaveholders sexually victimizing their female slaves. In La cuarterona, as in Cecilia Valdés, the narrative of incest functions as an allegory of a corrupt slave society and is central to the plot. In both works, the father/master character builds the colonial family/nation legitimately within the confines of a bourgeois marriage contract and illegitimately outside of wedlock. Failing to acknowledge paternity of his mixed-race children, this father-of-them-all generates the constant threat of sibling incest. In La cuarterona the Condesa is not only complicit in this corrupt system, but she also further distorts it to her advantage. The secret of Julia's paternal descent, which only Jorge and the Condesa seem to know, allows the Condesa to force the arranged marriage when she lies and tells her son that his true love is his sister. Ironically, Tapia does emphasize the lovers' fraternal bonds when Carlos, remembering their shared childhood, says: "parecíamos gemelos en nuestro carácter y aficiones inocentes" (693). While the Condesa uses the threat of incest that results from the abuse of power to impede further racial mixing, here one might read in incest a bond of friendship between equals that brings the races together, precisely the sort of relationship that threatens the ideological underpinnings of a patriarchal slave regime.

Carlos's paternalist rapport with Jorge, however, exemplifies how the asymmetrical relationships created by slavery are far from dissolving. The hierarchical nature of their relationship is made evident from the outset of the play when Carlos encourages Jorge to become his informant by invoking his long-time role as a faithful servant. In this beginning scene Carlos repeatedly urges Jorge to speak, but their conversation is not a dialogue in which information is exchanged since he only admits his love for Julia in an aside. Then again, it turns out that Jorge also has a secret. As the following conversation with Julia shows, knowing Julia's family history authorizes him to speak, to reveal a secret that would foil the Condesa's plans: "Si supiesen que a pesar de tu clase, podrías ir y decirles tantas cosas! Cosas que harían temblar a alguno de los que se está divirtiendo en este salón" (736). But Jorge adds that he should obey his mistress, who has kept the secret, and that he fears telling the truth might make Julia even more miserable. Knowing that Carlos is about to become the son-in-
law of her racist and cowardly father would be upsetting to Julia, but discovering who her true father is would also make it easier for Carlos to pursue her. Just as Julia fears losing her cloak of invisibility, perhaps Jorge wishes to protect her from a relationship that he accepts as impossible. In the final analysis, none of Tapia’s characters become agents of change because they are immobilized by the roles created in what Memmi calls “the colonial drama” (70) which offers only two parts: colonizer/colonized, or oppressor/oppressed (Memmi 89). In this scenario, the characters of color, Jorge and Julia, are overly conditioned by emotional subservience while, the liberal reformist, Carlos, is blind to his complicity in perpetuating social bondage.

When Jorge does exercise his power, his words come too late to prevent Carlos’s loveless marriage and Julia’s death. Some might read the play’s tragic ending as resigned or imitative of romantic dramatic devices, but in Tapia’s conception of theatre, martyrdom represents a triumph (eternal life in heaven) while the villain who lives is devoured by remorse: “sobreviviendo en la temporalidad, muere eternamente” (Conferencias 98). Even in the context of the post-abolition Puerto Rican première, ending the play with a black servant speaking out and exposing his white masters as calculating liars and hypocrites constitutes a symbolically important act; moreover, the play in its entirety staged, in a social arena, scenes from a slave society that many Spaniards and creoles during the 1860s and 1870s almost certainly did not wish to witness. Centre-staging the issue of race defied the conventions of nineteenth-century Spanish American drama and fulfilled Hostos’s axiom: “A nuevo escenario, nuevas escenas” ("La cuarterona" 76). The theatre, like the better-known romantic novels, helped define emerging Caribbean collective identities by advancing abolition, the crucial movement towards an enlightened modernity imagined by liberal reformers. But stories of mixed racial identities in which plots are predicated on the dynamic of seeing and being seen take on new meanings in a public space where spectators join together to watch actors performing social and racial identities. The anxiety produced by racial ambiguity is heightened in the live theatre event that, in Hostos’s words, forces audience members to look into the mirror and see their complicity in sustaining an illegitimate social order based on white supremacy. Although the liberal reformism embodied in the play may have been anchored in more broad-based cosmopolitan terms than national ones, the fact that La cuarterona continues to be performed today as a part of Puerto Rico’s national repertoire speaks volumes to its critique of colonialism and the inherently racist quality of the coloniality of power that still structures relationships on the island and between Puerto Rico and the United States.

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NOTES

1 As my essay shows, I agree with Lowell Fiet's suggestion in his important book *El teatro puertorriqueño reimaginado* that reading *La cuarterona* in a wider context of contemporaneous literary representations of race sheds light on this "siempre presente-ausente" (96-98) theme in Puerto Rican theatre. I also coincide with Fiet in noting the absence of details regarding the play in Hostos's article, although my interpretation of the essay draws out Hostos's understanding of theatre whereas Fiet's comments focus on censorship as an explanation for the article's circumvention of the racial theme (105-06).

2 "Interracial," a term employed by Werner Sollors to describe a person who is "neither black nor white yet both" (3) is also useful in describing persons of mixed race descent and the relationships between people of different races. In his study of literary representations of interracialism, Sollors unites countless texts (although only a few produced by Latin American authors) and illuminates recurring themes, motifs, and topoi in stories with mixed-blood characters.

3 Studies by Antonia Saez, Angelina Morfi, and, more recently, Edgar Quiles, for example, focus primarily on relating the play's themes, language, and form to different literary movements. All critics note the play's racial theme, but with the exception of Fiet and Aníbal González, none engage deeply with the politics of race in the text.

4 In my estimation, *La cuarterona* has been overlooked in both the Latin American and North American traditions of abolitionist literature. In addition to reading the play in relation to the Cuban novels I mention, it would be useful to develop further links between the play and works such as Lydia Maria Child's story "The Quadroons," (1842), Elizabeth Livermore's novel *Zoe, or The Quadroon's Triumph: A Tale for the Times* (1855), the novel and play versions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and Dion Boucicault's play *The Octoroon* (1859). Tapia's play confirms that he must have been familiar with these texts, although if one were to judge by his memoirs and lectures on literature, it would appear that he read only European authors.

5 I am indebted to Doris Sommer's analyses of Cecilia Valdés in her books *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* and *Proceed with Caution When Writing About Minority Literatures in the Americas* for inspiring me to think about how secrets and lies function in *La cuarterona*.

6 This explains their variable positions in different constructions of the Puerto Rican literary canon (see González 59-84).

7 Tapia studied, traveled, and mingled to varying degrees with the "who's who" of Puerto Rican separatists, autonomists, and abolitionists: José Julián Acosta, Segundo Ruiz Belvis, Román Baldorioty de Castro, Francisco Mariano Quiñones, Emeterio Betances, and Eugenio María de Hostos.

8 My references to Habermas draw from ideas presented in the first two parts of his well-known book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in particular
the sections “On the Genesis of the Bourgeois Public Sphere” (14-26) and “Institutions of the Public Sphere” (31-42).

It is important to remember, however, that, historically, in the Caribbean imagining community has not always signified the creation of a limited and sovereign nation. Early dreams of a Caribbean confederation defied the notion of a geographically and linguistically defined nation state and represented what Buscaglia-Salgado (xxiii-iv) calls a “mulatto” alternative to an insularist creole nationalism that perpetuated colonialist ideologies of race and a rising US hegemony in the region. More recently, scholars analyzing the transnational identities produced by the contemporary Caribbean Diaspora also seek alternatives to Anderson’s model of the nation. In her study on migration culture in the Hispanic Caribbean, Yolanda Martinez-San Miguel writes that by drawing from Anthony Smith and Etienne Balibar’s work on ethnicity and nation, “manejo el concepto de la nación como una forma de identificación colectiva basada en una comunidad étnica, y no necesariamente como un concepto jurídico que suponga la presencia de un territorio definido con un estado soberano o la definición de unas fronteras que delimiten necesariamente un espacio físico” (32).

According to Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, “theatre” comes from the Greek word theatron, which is derived from “theasthai: to view and “thea”: act of seeing,” while the Latin word auditorium literally means “lecture room.”

Jorge’s condición is unclear. I suspect that he is a liberto, an ex-slave, who continues to serve his abolitionist master. As we shall see, Carlos may oppose slavery, but he does not seem to object to a hierarchy that places him in a paternalistic position with respect to Jorge.

Although Habermas’s theory of the bourgeois public sphere provides a substantial foundation for conceiving democracy, in reality, only limited groups had access to the realm of discursive interaction he describes. Feminist scholars in particular have scrutinized the unarticulated gender subtext in Habermas’s theory; in areas like the Spanish Caribbean, race is also central to the question of who participates in the public sphere.

Ricardo Cobián observes that Puerto Rico’s nineteenth-century theatre history is literally framed by acts of censorship. The first play to be performed in Puerto Rico, El triunfo del trono y lealtad puertorriqueña by the Spaniard Tomás de Córdova was a preemptive response to an anti-colonial play that never made it to the stage, whereas the final play performed in the nineteenth century, La entrega del mando o fin del siglo (1899) by Eduardo Meireles was cancelled by the North American government after one performance (Cobián 16).

Ramos-Perea (76-77) argues that we should look to nineteenth-century black Puerto Rican authors such as Eleuterio Derkes and Manuel Alonso Pizarro for the true origins of “Puerto Rican” theatre. He maintains that the European settings, the lack of regionalisms in the language, and the ideological content of Tapia’s plays participated in a European hegemonic discourse that allowed him to become a
The "national" voice in Puerto Rican literature, and that he should not be regarded as the sole founder of the racial theme in Puerto Rican theatre.

For more on the debate over the nature of racial prejudice and discrimination in Puerto Rico see, see, among others, the controversial studies by Martín Sagrera, Tomás Blanco, Isabelo Zenon Cruz, and José Luis González.

There is some confusion with regard to dating the play's première in San Juan. According to Angelina Morfi and Edgar Quiles, the play was performed by the Compañía Robreño in the Teatro Moratín in 1877. Pasarell mentions in his history, however, that this company had dissolved by 1873 and that the Teatro Moratín was not inaugurated until 1878. It therefore seems likely that the date and company listed in Pasarell and in Nilda González's (113) bibliography of Puerto Rican theatre is more accurate: 1878 in the Teatro Moratín by Compañía Astol Prado (although Pasarell elsewhere lists 1877 as the date). I would like to thank professor and playwright José Luis Ramos Escobar for drawing my attention to this puzzle.

According to the 1860 Anuario estadístico cited in Luis M. Díaz Soler's history of slavery in Puerto Rico (259), there were 300,406 whites and 288,775 people of color (41,738 slaves and 247,037 free people of color). In Cuba, Martínez-Alier (3) finds the following statistics for the year 1862: 757,610 whites and 589,967 people of color (368,850 slaves and 221,417 free people of color).

Don Crispulo's anxiousness echoes don Cándido Gamboa's obsession with proving his family's white heritage and securing its status by buying a title in Cecilia Valdés. As one character points out, just because don Cándido is Spanish, "no está exento de la sospecha de tener sangre mezclada, pues supongo que es andaluz y de Sevilla vinieron a América los primeros esclavos negros. Tampoco los árabes, que dominaron en Andalucía más que en otras partes de España, fueron de raza pura caucásica, sino africana" (135).

In other words, unlike the typical "mimic man" who is marked as racially different but is Spanish in taste and social mores (in Fanon's terms, black skin/white masks), don Crispulo's obscure origins suggest his desire to superimpose his "white" skin with an even whiter mask.

In Sab, however, not just the parents, but one of the marriage partners also willingly participates in forming a marriage bound by interest. Sab, lamenting Carlota's marriage to Enrique Otway, exclaims: "¿Y él..., él la tomará por mujer, como a un género de mercancía, por cálculo, por conveniencia... haciendo una especulación vergonzosa del lazo más santo" (222).

Sollors (232), drawing from Carol Anne Beane's study of mulatto characters in Latin American novels, notes that the future/past distinction is associated with stereotypic progressive/conservative views of mixed-racial identities.

Sommer's interpretation of the function of incest in Cecilia Valdés and Sollors's study of the incest motif in interracial literature guide my reading of the theme in La cuarterona.
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