

## Movement and Metonymy in Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas's *Boda de negros*

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**Abstract:** As an expression of early modern Spanish anxieties about race, Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas's *romance* "Boda de negros" almost speaks for itself. In it, a viciously satirical poetic voice narrates the journey of a black couple's wedding party as it passes through the streets of a Spanish city, presumably Madrid, making its way from the church to the site of the wedding banquet. The newlyweds navigate the passage between exterior and interior spaces to suggest a relationship between the body and the body politic as references to physical contamination become symbols of social ills. Evocation of the transatlantic slave trade signals geographical displacement as a symbol of shifts in class structure in early modern Spain that, because of slavery's association with New World commerce, extends the poem's reach beyond that of the simple binaries of black and white. By virtue of the slaves' existence as commodities, as ambivalent symbols of both abject poverty and the extravagances of extreme wealth, the poem posits the transatlantic exchanges between Spain and its colonies as a destabilizing force, using the concept of race to move readers towards a different, though related critique of class by which the *romance*'s black characters become metonymical extensions of the *indiano*.

**Key words:** "Boda de negros," class, contamination, early modern Spain, Francisco de Quevedo, race, slave trade, transatlantic

**Resumen:** Como expresión de las ansiedades acerca de la etnicidad de la España de la temprana modernidad, el romance "Boda de negros" de Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas casi habla por sí mismo. Aquí, una voz poética narra de una forma agudamente satírica el trayecto de la fiesta de bodas de una pareja negra al pasar por las calles de una ciudad española, entendida como Madrid, llegando desde la iglesia al sitio de el banquete matrimonial. Los novios navegan el trayecto entre espacios exteriores e interiores para sugerir una relación entre el cuerpo y el cuerpo político como referencias a la contaminación física como símbolo de los males sociales. La evocación del esclavo transatlántico señala una descentralización geográfica como símbolo de los cambios en la jerarquía social de la España de la temprana modernidad que, a causa de la asociación de la esclavitud con el comercio del Nuevo Mundo, extiende el alcance del poema más allá de los sencillos binarios de blanco y negro. Dada la existencia de los esclavos como mercancía, como símbolos ambivalentes tanto de la extrema pobreza como extravagancias de la riqueza desmesurada, el poema sostiene los intercambios transatlánticos entre España y sus colonias como una fuerza desequilibrante, utilizando el concepto de la etnicidad para presentarles a los lectores una crítica distinta, aunque relacionada, de la clase social, a través de lo cual los personajes negros del romance se convierten en extensiones metonímicas del *indiano*.

**Key words:** "Boda de negros," clase, contaminación, España de la temprana modernidad, Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas, etnicidad, comercio de esclavos, transatlántico

As an expression of early modern Spanish anxieties about race, Francisco de Quevedo y Villegas's "Boda de negros" almost speaks for itself.<sup>1</sup> In it, a viciously satirical poetic voice narrates the journey of a black couple's wedding party as it passes through the streets of a Spanish city, presumably Madrid, making its way from the church to the site of the wedding banquet. The newlyweds navigate the passage between exterior and interior spaces to suggest a relationship between the body and the body politic as references to physical contamination become symbolic references to social ills. Evocation of the transatlantic slave trade signals geographical

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<sup>1</sup> This text first appeared in print in *El parnaso español: monte en dos cumbres dividido, con las nueve musas*, edited and published in 1648 by Josef Antonio González de Salas. Citations that appear in this essay are taken from the more recent edition of Quevedo's poetry published by José Manuel Blecaua.

displacement as a symbol of shifts in class structure in early modern Spain that, because of slavery's association with New World commerce, extends the poem's reach beyond that of the simple binaries of black and white. "Boda de negros" articulates a critique of social mobility—what Quevedo most assuredly sees as social instability—that would replace nobility with wealth as the principal means of determining social value. In doing so, the text constitutes a discursive deviation that, through images of blacks in motion, attempts to reveal, define, and thus, contain, a relatively new class of white Spaniard, the *indiano*.

The suggestion of a relationship between the characters in Quevedo's poem and the *indiano* forms part of a wider critical discussion about blackness as a stand-in for (an)other. Most scholars agree that, ironically, depictions of blacks in early modern Spanish literature actually functioned to affirm a narrowly defined notion of that which could be considered authentically Spanish. Writing about black characters in Golden Age drama, Annette Ivory notes a change in their characterization, from the buffoons that appear in sixteenth-century plays to what Ivory describes as "the flattering portrait of the Black as a superstar, as an object of admiration" (614). Such admiration is not without its price, however. Ivory offers as an example the specific case of Diego Jiménez de Enciso's *La comedia famosa de Juan Latino*, in which the black protagonist's function as a puppet-like spokesperson for Spanish nationalism overshadows his elevation to scholar and hero. Ivory writes that Juan Latino remains shackled by "perpetual slavery and boundless loyalty to the traditions of Spain" (617) and that his character functions "to control, dominate and crush the ambitions of the converted Jewish and Moorish minorities in the play" (615).

Quevedo's *oeuvre* includes a similarly ambivalent portrayal of a black character that, like Enciso's Juan Latino, has provoked considerable critical discussion. In *La hora de todos*, an unnamed *negro* delivers an impassioned argument in favor of blacks' emancipation, "Para nuestra esclavitud no hay otra causa sino la color, y la color es accidente, y no delito . . . De nuestra tinta han florecido en todas las edades varones admirables en armas y letras" (410-11). Nevertheless, this reasoned defense of blacks rests on an attack against Jews, "Menos son causa de esclavitud cabezas de borlilla y pelo en burujones . . . y fuera más justo que lo fueran en todas partes los naricísimos, que traen las caras con proas y se suenan un peje espada . . . Si la color es causa de esclavitud, que se acuerden de los bermejós, a imitación a Judas, y se olviden de los Negros" (411). Though the defense of blacks seems at odds with the characters depicted in "Boda de negros," its ridicule of a religious minority is entirely consistent with the negative portrayal of *conversos* and *moriscos* in other texts by Quevedo. Mar Martínez-Góngora posits that this seeming contradiction, a speech in favor of the emancipation of blacks and, at the same time, an anti-Semitic rant, serves a single discursive purpose. She writes, "El clima de ansiedad social provocado por una conciencia de semejanza con aquel, judío o musulmán, con el que el sujeto trata de distanciarse, explica la conveniencia de acoger al africano de raza negra como una alteridad incuestionable" (266). For Martínez-Góngora, then, the rhetorical fervor of the black African in *La hora de todos* is an instrument of Catholic hegemony because, unlike recent *white* converts to Christianity, the alterity of blacks is entirely visible. This observation is key to my own understanding of "Boda de negros", in which black slaves represent, by association, the contamination brought to Spain by the *indianos*.

This idea that references to blacks take readers on an indirect route towards a construction of "white" also figures prominently in scholarly readings of "Boda de negros." In various analyses of the poem, critics highlight, explicitly and implicitly, the displacement of meaning that creates and distances a marginal group in order to define and affirm hegemony. Ignacio Arrellano provides much useful information about the instances of wordplay that appear in the *romance*, as well as a general

overview of early modern Spanish burlesque poetry, clarifying the ambiguities of the text's conceptist language. Other essays grapple with socio-political implications similar to those noted by Ivory in her examination of blacks in Spanish Renaissance and Baroque drama. In a Bakhtinian reading, John R. McCaw argues that Quevedo's description of the wedding banquet, a social rite that Bakhtin links to fertility, growth, and birth, creates a positive association with blacks that challenges the negative satire of the poetic voice. Martínez-Góngora, this time writing specifically about "Boda de negros," situates the presentation of race in the poem within the context of early modern Spanish discursive representations of *conversos* and *moriscos*. Writing about what she terms "la invención de la 'blancura'," she claims that the satirical depiction of blacks functions contrastively to produce a white subject confident in his ability to distinguish himself from a religious or cultural other. (264).

In these three readings, Quevedo emerges as the sharp-tongued spokesperson whose writing reveals latent urgencies underlying early modern Spain's zealous pursuit of sameness, as well as its concomitantly relentless persecution of difference. For both McCaw and Martínez-Gongora, the images of blacks that the *romance* constructs exemplify a social and moral chaos that, on some level, would serve to reassure seventeenth-century white Spaniards of the existence of a concomitant order to which they could strive to return. Arrellano's more traditionally philological reading rests on a similar binary. Quevedo's descriptions of blacks become one of many potential mechanisms that allow for the verbal distortions of conceptist burlesque poetry, and this creation of a deliberately disordered language begs a re-ordering, the fixing of a logical conceptual framework that might offer a sense of discursive dominance.

To these discussions of how Quevedo's poem equates "black" with deviation, as well as the recognition that departures from a norm can facilitate its perpetuation or, conversely, can undermine its authority, I wish to add an additional journey, one leading towards America. On this somewhat divergent path, I will explore how the concept of "race," communicated most conspicuously via antithetical images of "black" and "white," moves readers towards a different, though related critique of class by which the *romance's* black characters become metonymical extensions of the returnee, a newly moneyed class of people in the peninsula. In doing so, I am informed by George Mariscal's description of how early modern Spaniards understood ethnic difference, a notion that "included not only a pseudo-biological understanding of 'race' but a concentrated social apparatus to protect aristocratic interests threatened by an emergent class whose power relied on accumulated wealth" (9). I would submit that, through its emphasis on physical and, by extension, social movement, "Boda de negros" forms part of just such a mechanism. By virtue of the slaves' existence as commodities, as ambivalent symbols of both abject poverty and extreme wealth, the poem replicates perceived extremes of the Spanish economy, positing the transatlantic exchanges between Spain and its colonies as a destabilizing force.

A brief overview of the history of sub-Saharan slaves in Spain offers some evidence in support of an American subtext in "Boda de negros." Although black slaves were present in Spain long before 1492, the conquest and colonization of the New World provoked a sharp increase in their numbers, along with other major economic shifts. In the sixteenth century, Seville was one of the most important markets for the slave trade in Western Europe, and it possessed, along with other Spanish cities such as Valencia and Madrid, a sizable black population comprised of both slaves and non-slaves. Results of a mid-century census conducted in Seville reveal that one in fourteen residents was a slave and that most of these people were of sub-Saharan African origin (Pike 173). Although the majority of African captives that passed through Spanish markets were destined for the colonies, they may well have spent time in the peninsula both before and after reaching American soil. Ruth Pike

writes of a “counter migration” of blacks from the New World to Spain as “many Spaniards, having enriched themselves in America during the first decades of the sixteenth century, eventually returned home . . . where they could maintain their contacts, usually commercial, with the Indies. These returning Spaniards, nicknamed *indianos*, invested their newly found wealth in elegant town houses staffed with Negro slaves from the colonies” (190-191). If the presence of blacks was commonly associated, in the sixteenth-century, with new wealth from the New World, by the time Quevedo was writing, the *indianos* might well have been among the few who could still afford to own slaves. In fact, during the seventeenth century, the increased demand for African captives in the American colonies drove prices up, causing a marked decline in slavery in the peninsula. By this time, slave ownership had become, in the words of Junius P. Rodríguez, “beyond the reach of most sectors of what had become an impoverished Spanish population” (604).

In “Boda de negros,” blacks become synonymous with the perceived negative effects of New World commerce in general and with the *indiano* in particular. By illustrating a link between money and marriage, they share a common feature of many literary depictions of the returnee. In addition, their specious nuptials heighten the sense of an uncertain lineage, which, coupled with a desire to climb socially, exhibit other characteristics typically associated with this social group. Finally, and in spite of the black couple’s efforts to mimic acceptable social practices, the dangers of their inescapable otherness, which is heightened by their association with a geographically distant land, become evident through suggestions of ominous ritual. Within the discursive framework of Quevedo’s text, such rites illustrate the contaminative consequences of transatlantic commerce.

Embodiments of economic disparity, the bride and groom represent both the excessive riches of slave owners, a literal flesh-and-blood fortune, as well as the utter neediness of certain sectors of seventeenth-century Spanish society. Quevedo describes the wedding party’s financial state with a parallel interplay of excess and scarcity, using multiplicity, words and phrases with double and triple meanings, to signify lack, “Tan pobres son que una blanca / no se halla entre todos ellos” (29-30). Similarly, he emphasizes the abundance of food served, but also its lack of quality, describing the event as a “boda de hongos” (59-60). Much of Quevedo’s wordplay constitutes an unsophisticated caricature of blacks’ physical appearance, a use of language that is evident in the text and has been well documented by scholars. Arellano, for example, observes, “Los manjares que corresponden a tal boda son, naturalmente, negros: pan. vino tinto, carbonada . . . que establece ingeniosa proporción entre la comida concreta y la circunstancia de ser comida por negros” (275). My interest in these lines relates more to their exemplification of baroque antithesis; in particular, the use of the word *hongos* evokes both a lamentably poor wedding banquet (Arrellano 275), a sign of poverty or lack, and, at the same time (and perhaps tellingly), a proliferation of fungi. Further, the mere presence of these slaves attests to the wealth of a class of individuals who remain conspicuously absent from the text but whose presence in the country accounts for the literal appearance of the black’s wedding procession as well as the metaphorical “boda de negros,” or state of confused boundaries, wrought by social change.

Tellingly, the poem links these slaves’ financial deficiencies to a certain moral poverty, one that mirrors the ignoble values that, from the point of view of Quevedo, claim the relatively new Spanish mercantile class as their source. Playing with the phonetic similarities of *cornado*, a Spanish coin of minimal value, and *cornudo*, the *romance* suggests that economic exchange and the interests of a third party form the basis of a marriage doomed to infidelity, “por tener un cornado / casaron a este moreno” (31-32). Of course, within the context of human trafficking, family and other

relationships would have been, necessarily, viewed through a financial lens. Alfonso X's *Siete partidas*, which continued to be "the ultimate authority in slavery matters" until well after Quevedo was writing (Fergus 80), gives special attention to defining socially appropriate relationships between slaves and other slaves and between slaves and their masters, particularly in matters of sexuality, marriage, and money. The *Siete partidas* allow slaves to marry and to choose a spouse and stress the importance of keeping married slaves together, even if doing so implied a financial transaction and, perhaps, the intervention of the Church:

E si dos siervos que fuesen casados en uno oviessen dos señores, el uno en una tierra e el otro en otra . . . debe le elesia, apremiar a los señores que compre el uno, el siervo del otro. E sin non lo quisieren fazer, debe apremiar el uno dellos qual tuviere por más guisado que venda el su siervo a ome que sea morador en aquella villa, o en aquel lugar do morare el señor del otro siervo. E sinon fallaren ninguno que lo quiera comprar, comprela la elesia, porque non bivan departidos, el marido, e la muger. (IV.21.I, II)

Further, the *Partidas* explicitly prohibit the rape or pimping of slaves, stipulating that if this were to occur the slave would be freed (IV.22. III, IV). Married men could have concubines, but, in order to protect noble bloodlines, their concubines could not be slaves (IV.24.1, 2, 3). Finally, slavery was matrilineal; that is, the status of the mother determined the status of the child (IV.21.1, 2). Based on these laws, then, if a slave married and went to serve in another household, that slave's owner was entitled to payment. Since any children born to slave women were, by law, born into slavery, any offspring produced from the union would become the property of the master. Conversely, if a master engaged in or promoted inappropriate sexual contact with slaves, he could, at least in theory, be forced to manumit them, thereby jeopardizing his assets.

Assuredly, confusing legal texts, literary texts, and actual social practices risks oversimplification. Other scholars note that in spite of any potential financial gain slave marriage may have offered, it appears that most owners opposed such unions and found ways to prevent them. As Aurelia Martín Casares and Marga G. Barranco observe, "being single was associated with a greater convenience or disposition, and historical sources testify that marriages between slaves were relatively rare due to the strong opposition of masters to the legalization of slave unions. Moreover, when slaves did marry, they did not necessarily share a household" (4-5). One possible explanation for the suggestion made in Quevedo's poem that this marriage could somehow offer economic benefit was the fact that a female slave often fetched a higher price than a male because of her association with social prestige (females did not generally do manual labor and served in homes), her ability to procreate, and her greater longevity (Lobo Cabrera 302). What does emerge from both the medieval *Partidas* and the early modern *romance*, something I believe most scholars would affirm, is the perception that, because servitude brought slaves and masters within close proximity of one another, the practice required vigilance if differences between center and margin were to be maintained. The *Siete partidas* offer guidelines for keeping thirteenth-century social divisions firmly in place, while "Boda de negros" uses the spectacle of a black wedding to manifest the destabilizing encroachment of otherness within the very midst of early modern Spanish society.

The persistent linking of marriage and economic exchange carries with it the taint of a diminished social value, a defect that further connects the blacks in Quevedo's poem to the *indiano*. The financially motivated nuptials depicted in "Boda de negros" call to mind common textual portrayals of the *indiano* who, as Mariscal

observes, driven by a desire to *medrar*, sought marriage with a Spanish woman of noble status (“The Figure” 5). The reference to Quevedo’s groom as a *moreno* further associates him with the returnee since, as Mariscal continues “an essential part of the *indiano*’s physiognomy was a tanned face, presumably the consequence of having spent time in hot American, Asian or African climates” (3). Consistent with the black couple’s symbolic significance in “Boda de negros.” Mariscal also writes that the adjective *moreno* “carries with it the long-standing prejudice against darker peoples even as it functions as a sign of potential wealth” (3). Finally, and due to *romance*’s suggestion of the black woman’s sexual promiscuity, any children born to this slave couple would, like the returnee, bear the burden of an uncertain lineage. Reminiscent of the reference to don Dinero’s “color quebrado,” “Boda de negros” capitalizes on this dual meaning of *moreno*, using black characters to reveal the corrupt, materialistic values of a new social group that threatened to upend the so-called virtues of an old aristocratic order.

In this revelatory role, blackness becomes an obvious visual illustration of the decadence lurking behind the glitzy façade of the *nouveau riche*. Quevedo writes of blacks’ tendency to put on airs in one of the poem’s many scatological references: “Con humos van de vengarse, / que siempre van de humos llenos / de los que por afrentarlos/ hacen los labios traseros” (22-24). He describes the bride in terms of her ridiculous efforts to apply cosmetics to her black skin: “Iba afeitada la novia/todo el tapetado gesto, / con hollín y con carbon/y con tinta de sombreros” (25-28). Later, we read that the wedding feast consists of *tocino*, the presence of which elicits an enthusiastic response among the ostentatiously Christian guests, “Mas cuando llegó el tocino/hubo grandes sentimientos, / y pringados con pringadas / un rato se enternecieron” (69-72). When these slaves marry, practice Catholicism, and imitate the customs of white Christian Spaniards, they pretend to be what they are not. In this fashion, they approximate the social climbing of the wealthy Spaniard of humble origins who, for example, buys an aristocratic title in order to ascend socially. In “Boda de negros,” the slaves’ easily parodied efforts to mimic culturally legitimate practices function as all too apparent objects of satire that lead readers towards a slightly more elusive target of critique. And although the social aspirations of the blacks do parallel those of the newly moneyed class, there exists an important difference for which race ought to be taken into account. Indeed, if the characters in “Boda de negros” possess any redeeming quality, it is, ironically, the *transparency* of their blackness. In a noteworthy twist on the familiar Baroque trope of deceptive appearances, Quevedo uses the visibility of black Africans to expose the vice of social pretense, in general, and to undermine the social pretensions of the *indiano* in particular.

The description of the wedding feast near the end of the text brings the character’s journey full circle, from the church, through the streets, and then back to a church (of sorts). This path replicates the back-and-forth travels of the returnee, who would leave Europe for America and then return to Europe. Moreover, like the *indiano*, these blacks reenter the fold bearing the burden of difference. Called Francisca del Puerto and Tomé, the slaves’ identities express myriad meanings. Francisca is a common slave name in Spanish literature that, especially in combination with “Tomé” and “del Puerto,” brings to mind the Guinean island of Santo Tomé del Puerto from which slaves were commonly imported (Arrellano 274). “Del Puerto” might also refer to the murky origins of the seafaring *indiano* who, according to the literary construct, abandoned the values of nationalism and honor in his pursuit of wealth. Being, primarily, *from* and *of* the port, his lineage and loyalty can only be tied to the passageway through which both economic and geographical exchanges occur.

Francisca and Tomé’s round-trip journey brings about a defilement communicated via inverted Christological images that foreground a circular and, thus,

limitless—though contaminated—flow of intake and emission. The wedding meal takes place in a stable, and the guests are served wine and bread, evocative of both the birthplace of Christ and of communion. Nevertheless, the stanzas that follow malevolently twist conventional Christian symbolism to suggest sinister practices:

Hubo jetas en la mesa,  
y en la boca de los dueños,  
y hongos, por ser la boda  
de hongos, según sospecho.  
Trujeron muchas morcillas,  
y hubo algunos que, de miedo,  
no las comieron pensando  
se comían a si mismos.  
Cuál por morder el mondongo  
se atarazaba algún dedo,  
pues sólo diferenciaban  
en la uña de lo negro. (57-68)

In addition to their repeated jokes that stereotypically caricaturize blacks, these lines contain numerous references that confuse the wedding guests with the food that they are about to consume. Lips appear as mushrooms, and *morcillas* and *mondongo* are mistaken for fingers. Mentions of *carbonada*, blackened grilled meat, and *pringada*, a punishment meted out to slaves that involved basting the skin in hot liquids, establish further conceptual connections between the seared meat that the wedding guests eat and the burned flesh of the castigated. Such references, which follow directly the inverted images of the bread and body of Christ, move readers from the humorous *boda de negros* as a parodic celebration of mass to the more ominous hint of cannibalism. Given the color and shape of the food, the text also evokes coprophagy, positing black slaves as the abject discharge of a diseased body politic.

It is precisely this suggestion of radical consumption and excretion, ultimately of excess, that links the portrayal of Africans to the text's implied critique of a very specific class of Spaniard. From this perspective, the *indiano* is defined by what he possesses; he is what he consumes (eats) and, by extension, what he excretes. Addressing the issue of the extent to which Spain experienced a true decline in the seventeenth century is beyond the scope of this project and misses the point of the essay. However, I am interested, following J.H. Elliott's lead, in Quevedo's well-documented perception of his nation's decline, in general, and in how this perception appears in "Boda de negros" in association with the *indiano*, in particular. Given that the economic benefits of the discovery, conquest, and colonization of the Americas did elude most Spaniards in the peninsula, for Quevedo, it would appear that the only signs of the lavish banquet of economic promise were its post-consumer emissions: poverty, crime, and disease.

The rhetorical leaps in the text follow a similar circular route as its characters, shifting from the title's symbolic meaning to its literal one, only to lead readers back to figurative significance. Quevedo's *romance* renders literal the expression "boda de negros," a metaphor to describe any chaotic, disorganized event, and then uses the image to function as a metonymical extension of a more widespread social disorder. Moving in this fashion, from metaphorical, to literal, to metonymical significance, the wedding party passes through the city traversing the public space of the street en route to the private space of the dining hall and the *apoyento*. Tellingly, in the space where, presumably, the couple will spend their first night together as husband and wife, a "ministro guineo" appears with dead man's shroud slung over his shoulder. Using a coconut to dispense water from a cauldron, he administers what should be a purifying

liquid and, as the guests perform their ablutions, leaves enough dirty water in the basin to, in the words of Quevedo, “ensuciar todo un reino” (80). These lines conclude the wedding feast as the fetid contents of a sullied vessel replace the cleansing image of the *aguamanil*, a stand in for holy water or a baptismal font. Such images parallel competing notions of the transatlantic flow between Spain and America, a path that could lead to rebirth or, conversely, to death and decay. As Javier Ciordia Murguerza makes explicit, Quevedo views American-earned money, as “el principio de la corrupción y desintegración de las costumbres españolas,” and as a source of wealth that, paradoxically, “dejaba a España cada vez más empobrecida” (4). “Boda de negros” evinces these anxieties, imparting color to the seepage from the margins of the Spanish empire and, thus, rendering visible the perceived corruptive effects of its flow towards the center.

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