La mujer invisible -the invisible woman- steps on stage wearing sexy black go-go boots and a low-cut, knee-high, black-and-white polka dot dress that accentuates her big curvy body. Her head is crowned with dark brown unruly curls. She looks fabulous and she knows it. La mujer invisible came to tell it to your face, she is going to say it all as it is. When she starts singing, you just have to hold your breath and let her sensual, potent voice caress you, that same voice that will bluntly tell you a couple of truths.

When I first saw Nancy Millán’s performance La Mujer Invisible, I was deeply moved by her compelling story about growing up a fat girl and becoming an over-weight woman. Her presence on stage was an act of resistance against dominant standards of women’s beauty. Instead of asking for our sympathy and pity, she claims visibility as a woman and as an actress by producing her own performance piece, where she is the protagonist, standing in the center, becoming the evidence that fatness is not the opposite of beauty or talent.

After seeing Millán’s work I could not stop myself from writing about it. My short review, as other reviews published or comments circulating the Internet have been mainly concerned with the quality of the show and its main theme: obesity and body image. Recently I noticed that even though that is indeed the central topic, Millán’s work also addresses race. In this essay I will argue that in her performance piece, La Mujer Invisible, Millán uses hair to discuss the process of racialization in Puerto Rico and in doing so she is challenging discourses of racial harmony. I am applying the concept of synecdoche, according to which a part stands for
a whole. First I will give a brief explanation about how race and its relationship with black hair is constructed and understood in the Puerto Rican context. Then, I will describe the general characteristics of Millán’s performance piece, in order to continue with an in-depth reading of the scene where she addresses the relationship between women’s hair and race.

I will use the original script, the reviews, the webpage and my recollection to analyze this performance. I went to see the show twice in 2006 when it was performed in the bohemian café Taller Cé in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico. Since then, I have been in conversations with Millán about the show. Throughout the essay, when I use the name Millán I’m referring to the author, whereas Nancy refers to the persona or character of the invisible woman. When I use the term black hair, it will refer to the hair of black people and those of African decent as defined in Ingrid Banks book Hair Matters, not necessarily to describe its color, more so its texture and quality.

IS THERE A PUERTO RICAN RACE?

In Puerto Rico, many argue that racism is an issue of the past. The official discourse of race says Puerto Rican “race” and culture, and the Puerto Rican him/herself, is the result of a mixture of three races: Taino Indian, Spanish and African. This mestizaje gives birth to the idealized light brown skinned and straight dark hair Puerto Rican. It also perpetuates the discourses of blanqueamineto, whitening or “fixing of the race”. As Isar Godreu explains, “blackness is socially marked on the island as inferior, ugly, dirty, unintelligent, backward, reduced to a primitive hypersexuality (particularly in the case of black women).” Hence, it is not surprising that in the 2000 Census, 80% of the population described themselves as white, whereas only 8% classified themselves as black. In 1995, an article was published in a local
newspaper, where it was argued that two more centuries would vanish all blackness in the population.\(^5\)

In popular beliefs and legal documents, U.S. constructions of race establish that a black ancestor will determine race as black. In Puerto Rico, the contrary happens: a Spanish or white ancestor may allow the desired movement closer to a European heritage (i.e. white).\(^6\) Contrary to the more common practices of other European colonizers, the Spanish had sexual and marital relationships with native and African women, whether by force or by consent from early on in the conquest, resulting in a process of *mestizaje*. Therefore, the Spanish established in their American colonies a system of castes that determined the access to power according to the level of blood mixture and skin tones. “Whiter” features (light skin, straight hair, pointy nose) might allow upward movement of status while “black” features made it difficult for or stopped social mobility.

These notions of race are still alive and engraved in the Puerto Rican collective consciousness. As Frances Negrón-Muntaner explains, “racial identification (and attribution) in Puerto Rico is partly determined by a combination of phenotypical factors, including thickness of lips, skin tone, broadness of nose, eye color, cheekbones, and-most importantly- hair texture, which is physically coterminous with the skin and hence often symbolizes the entire body’s ‘race.’”\(^7\) And if the hair is tightly coiled, curly, or nappy it becomes evidence of an undeniable trace of black race. Hence the evidence needs to be concealed or erased.

**THE INVISIBLE WOMAN’S HAIR**

*La Mujer Invisible* has characteristics of the political cabaret: a mixture of song, comedy, and witty social critique popular in Puerto Rico during the eighties and in recent years among
women artists. Instead of the more popular tropical rhythms, the live music that accompanies the performance is rock. Millán sings and plays the guitar accompanied by another guitarist, a bass, a drummer and two backup singers. The backup singers also play the part of supporting characters whenever needed to support the protagonist’s performance. Millán uses autobiographical material as text, a characteristic of solo performances where an “artist/performer/protagonist transforms often damaging experiences of marginalization into an act of self-affirmation that allows the audience to participate by laughing and identifying with her.”

The invisible woman is Nancy; the songs, written by her, are a reflection of her deepest feelings: sadness, love, anger, despair and hope. The stories are her memories that explain how she learned from her parents, schoolteachers, friends and others that her body was wrong, that being fat meant being ugly, and that she would not be able to achieve her dreams of becoming a singer and actress because she was fat. And even worse that she would never find love. In what Nancy calls “the second part of this therapy”, she brings up her hair issues when talking about her obsession with makeover shows:

…what impresses me the most is women’s ferocious capacity to hate. We hate our bodies, our hairs, our noses, ours, ours, ours. I have hated many of those ours. The most obvious being the body that would make it impossible for anybody to love me. However, first I had to hate my hair…

When she mentions hating her hair, no further explanation is needed. The audience laughs and women nod their heads. Every audience member knows what she is talking about: Nancy has very curly hair. She then goes on to mention the terms used to describe “bad hair” in the Puerto Rican argot: “maranta, mapo de presidio, escobillón de municipio, pelo de pulpo, esponja de fregar, brillo, etc.” No further explanation is needed, since everyone is familiar with the so-called “bad hair” or natural black hair. These derogatory names imply that the generally tightly
coiled or curled, hard texture and unruliness of black hair is assumed as ugly and filthy. Furthermore, it is a reminder of the harassment black and mulatto people undergo.

Nancy goes on explaining her relationship with her hair:

When I was growing up, there were two hair types (no, they were not normal and dry):
good hair or bad hair or kinky (African). Here was my first identity crisis: is my hair
good or bad?¹¹

Then she walks from behind her microphone to her two backup singers, a man and a woman. They are both wearing women’s wigs. He is wearing blond straight hair and she is wearing an Afro. Nancy looks confused and uncertain of where to stand. Finally she stands between the two of them. Negron-Muntaner argues the “ways hair is coiffured are universally used to signify cultural identity, social status, age and gender. Across many cultures and historical periods, hair is also linked to the power of women to destroy, kill and seduce”¹² Some of these signifiers have been catalogued as good while others as evil. Typically, curly and black natural hair has symbolized evil, mystery, treacherousness, and wildness, defiance and seduction. A hair that needs to be controlled and tamed, that presents a problem more for others than to the owner. By taking a position between the two singers Millán, a light skinned green-eyed woman, is doing more than determining her hair type, she is assuming an identity of mixed race.

Her schoolteachers taught the following lessons on the link between hair and race to Millán. Lectures in elementary school on personal hygiene and good image were considered very important in the children’s education. These would inevitably involve some reference to hair. Nancy recalls a very specific example given by her fourth grade teacher. Now, she as an adult listens to her teacher lecturing. Mrs. Sánchez, performed by the female backup singer, addresses the audience who become the school children in the class. As the lecture goes on, Nancy makes side comments to the spectators:
MRS. SANCHEZ: Regardless of what type of hair one has, if you take good care of it and keep it clean, you will look good.
NANCY: Up to here, nothing strange.
MRS. SANCHEZ: For example, my supervisor, she is a colored, but her hair is always silk-like.
NANCY: (to the audience.) Silk-like hair.
MRS. SANCHEZ: That lady is always fixed-up nicely. And her hair is shiny, straight, perfect, just like silk.  

The implications of Mrs. Sánchez’ example of good hygiene and image are as much in what she says as in what she leaves unsaid about her supervisors’ hair. Despite the fact that her supervisor is black, she looked clean and elegant because she took good care of her hair and had it under strict control. She perceives this as something unusual. The teacher was amazed by how the black woman’s hair looked so “perfect”, meaning straight. Not only was it straight and shiny, altering its appearance, its texture was altered too, making it smooth and thin. In her article “Wearing your race wrong”, Noliwe Rooks argues that “certain hairstyles denote acceptable identity, others point to the possibility of an identity that cannot be tolerated.” In other words, as the teacher explains, there are ways to represent race that are positive and speak of your social and even “civilized” status. Whatever falls outside those norms is unacceptable and sends the wrong message.

After Mrs. Sánchez’ lecture is over, Nancy continues the narration:

We all know how kids are, so I guess as I did, other children did too: I looked around and I saw a black girl with kinky hair and thought: “Why isn’t your hair like silk, on the contrary, it is all coming out from the pony tail your mother made for you this morning.”

This comment implies that this girl was the only black girl in class, however, it is not clear if there are black boys in class, since the example the teacher gave was not only raced but gendered. The children have understood some of the teacher’s unsaid messages about blackness, and without hesitation and maybe with some anxiety, they look among each other to see if they
comply with the standards of so called good image. They are learning the subtle racist discourse present in their culture. Then Nancy turns the inquiry to herself:

What about my hair? Does my hair has to be silk-like too, or is it forgiven since it is not completely “bad”?\(^{15}\)

Popular ideals of beauty consider “European” features the most attractive while “African” features are the least attractive and ugly. Despite black feminist and anti-racists efforts to claim the beauty of black hair and blackness in general, in Puerto Rico these features are still perceived in the collective consciousness as undesirable. Therefore, the necessity of having hair like silk serves a double purpose: for women who have brown or light skin, it conceals their blackness; and for those with black or curly hair regardless of their skin tone, avoiding the perception of having ugly hair\(^{16}\).

Nancy addresses the audience again as she wonders:

Puerto Rico, being the strange country it is, and despite the fact that most people have curly hair, does not produce hair stylist who know what do with our coiled hair. The only possible destiny for our hair is to relax it or straighten it using blower and muscular strength.

At this moment, she pauses and looks defiantly at the audience, with her hands on her hips and with a firm voice says:

Obviously, this tyranny is over for me, and I look with hate and disdain at anyone who despises the texture of my hair, or that hints that it would look better straightened. \(^{17}\)

There is still one more childhood story of hair oppression. Despite this, the protagonist makes sure that the spectator knows that this is not her tragedy anymore. That she is not negating her blackness, which resides in her hair; on the contrary she embraces and claims its beauty. She is ready to resist any attempts, whether from fashion or from people in her life, to have her do otherwise. In the last anecdote, the male backup singer plays the part of Nancy’s ninth grade
teacher, Mrs. Delfina. This time instead of remaining as an outside editorializing voice, Nancy plays herself at age 14 and addresses the teacher:

**MRS. DELFINA:** Girl, come here please.

**NANCY:** ¿What is it Mrs.?

**MRS. DELFINA:** You should fix your hair like Lucy Pereda. Yes, because then you would be pulling your hair out of your face, and that will make you look better and thinner. 18

Young Nancy looks confused and ashamed by the teacher’s remarks and does not know how to respond. Adult Nancy comes out of character and addresses the audience. She argues that what the teacher meant was that the only thing worse than a fat woman, was a fat woman with big curly hair. She then explains that even though she did not like Pereda’s hairdo, she went home and tried the style just in case Mrs. Delfina was right. In this instant, young Nancy has found an answer to her question: is my hair forgiven since it is not completely bad? Well, not in society’s eye. The scene comes to an end with a song titled Medusa, recalling the Grecian spirit of the underworld that has snakes instead of hair, attracted men with her beauty and could turn to stone any human upon her gaze. She was finally beheaded and turned into a weapon by Perseus. While Medusa is represented in Greek mythology as an evil figure, feminists have reclaimed her as a symbol and reminder of violence against women, and the attempts to control their power. 19

As the band starts to play, Nancy waves her head displaying proudly and defiantly her Medusa-like hair:

**Medusa**

Why are you obsessed with my coiled hair?
Why do you ask me to comb my hair?  
Come on! Let me breathe!
You never have something good to say, you look at me with terror,

as if I were Medusa,  
ready to destroy with my hair.  
Is my hair making your plants grow?  
But it is time to grow up,  
and that means to quit fighting  
with my ancestral genetics.
In the song she ridicules those who fear the power in women’s hair and demand black hair to be under control. She inquires about this fear and finally, implicates herself. She understands that it is her responsibility to reject the notions imposed on her and accept her African heritage.

**CHALLENGING BLANQUEAMIENTO**

Historically the construction of the body and physiognomy of the black woman has come to signify a primitive, hyper sexualized body, and a source of corruption. In the past these ideas were backed up with pseudo scientific books, art, and other cultural products in order to support slavery and segregation. Today, they are so inserted in our collective consciousness that many have assumed the discourse of *blanqueamiento*, which creates the myth of racial harmony while perpetuating racial hierarchies.

In her performance Millán purposely makes a stop in her narrative about body image to address hair and its relationship to race. In doing so she is breaking with the denial of racism and racialization. She strategically chooses three instances from her childhood to explain how children in Puerto Rico are taught by their parents and their teachers how to reproduce racial anxieties, and how to navigate the icy waters of “racial harmony”. Contrary to what is expected of her, which is to participate in the process of whitening by hiding her blackness, she refuses to do so, and challenges whoever wants to impose on her their ideas on how to wear race. As Pear Cleage argues in her article “Hair Peace” the stories of black women and their relationship to their hair are not lessons of female bondage, they are “self-hate horror stories”. In her final song Nancy declares peace with her hair, thus embracing her African heritage and her black hair.
The translation of the text is mine, and is more concerned with giving the reader a sense of the usages of language than of being a word-by-word translation.

Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power and Black Women’s consciousness*. (New York: NYU Press, 2000) 172. Def. Natural black hair: nappy, kinky; bad hair; hair that is tightly coiled or curled.

Taino is the name that the Columbus gave to the natives living in most the Caribbean Islands. Taino means friend, good or noble in the Arawak language, which the natives spoke and presumably was not how they named themselves.


This is ironic since, before becoming the unified kingdom known as Spain, the South region of the Iberian Peninsula was under the rule of the north African Moors for eight centuries. This led to cultural and racial exchange between Iberians, Jews (who were already present in the region) and Muslims. Hence, the Spanish are multiethnic and racial mixture is evident in the South.


Arrowroot plant, penitentiary mop, city broom, octopus’ hair, dishwashing sponge, brillo pad, etc.

Millán, 21.

Negrón-Muntaner, 212.

Millán, 22.

Millán , 22.

Millán , 23.

In Puerto Rico, a person with brown skin and straight dark hair is often described as Indian, which due to the mystification of the disappeared *Tainos* Indians, denies blackness and is therefore desirable.

Millán , 20.

Millán , 23.


Pearl Cleage "Hairpeace - requirement for Afro-American women writers to discuss hair - Section 1: Black South Culture". *African American Review*. (Spring 1993) 4.