

Borinquena Blanca [White Native]: A Racialized Revisiting of Puerto Rican Independence through the Life of Lola Rodríguez de Tió, 1850-1900

Lucas René Ramos

In a Tortoiseshell: *In his Junior Paper, Lucas René Ramos takes an up-close approach to history by examining the life and work of Lola Rodríguez de Tió, a Puerto Rican poet and political activist, as a case study for larger issues. In the concluding section excerpted below, Lucas paints a picture of Rodríguez de Tió's later political life before tying his paper together by reminding the reader of his **motives** and what his intersectional study of Rodríguez de Tió adds to the scholarly conversation. These final takeaways make for a compelling **conclusion**.*

Excerpt

Seeing the political values Rodríguez de Tió had during the later portion of her life provides a clear picture of her socioeconomic and racial identities. A description of Rodríguez de Tió in 1908 by director Pedro González-Muñoz of *La Lucha*, a newspaper that covered Cuban independence struggles from 1885 to 1925, depicted the literary poet at a political gathering, imploring her fellow activists to educate her homeland (Puerto Rico) by learning “all languages ...We should be a pueblo that can understand itself in all languages!”¹

While the following statement can be read as Rodríguez de Tió believing her *pueblos* should quite literally learn every language of the world, further reinterpretation sees her words as a desire to continue seeing Puerto Rico and Cuba as emerging in a global context – to be *understood* by all languages and cultures of the world. As González-Muñoz analyzes Rodríguez de Tió's words:

Lola's words caused me to reflect. They plucked me from the world where exclusion and hyperboles of Gilberga had taken us. I thought that humanity does not stop in its forward march—that it goes on and on and on in a broader horizon, in search of other days, in search of other societies. I told myself that Lola could be right, that these people might well be blessed to be understood [and understand] all the languages on earth.²

In his article, González-Muñoz examines how Rodríguez de Tió's words contrast the elitist opinions of other activists, praising Rodríguez de Tió for her work in expanding the horizons and

¹ Gonzalez-Muñoz, Pedro. “Cavestany En El Ateneo.” *La Lucha*. November 10, 1909, 1. World Newspaper Archive.

² Ibid.

the marches for a post-independent Cuba. Though the image of the Greater Antilles in *La Lucha* offers a hopeful image for Cuba, it also shows who was seen as an *exclusivismo*, people which Rodríguez de Tió is seen as fighting against in activist circles. Her words, however, preach their own framework for understanding Cuba – and, more broadly, the Greater Antilles – as one which is given a political space, agency, and independence through the approval of “other societies,” languages, and cultures. The desire to be present, Puerto Rico and Cuba, among “all the languages of earth” was a hope that *los pueblos* would therefore be relatable to Europe and the U.S.

Years later in an interview, Rodríguez de Tió would go as far as saying she did not “believe in feminism [femininity] [crea en el feminismo];” women should use the home as “a place where women meet to talk about something more serious than feathers and belts.”³ The word *feminismo* here does not refer to modern day understandings of feminism, but to Rodríguez de Tió’s views of femininity and its drawbacks for women. Here, Rodríguez de Tió’s words deconstruct the nature of the home, where women should focus on “serious” issues as opposed to the fashion of feathers and belts – the home was a site where women could come together. Her statement demonstrated a nationalist imagining of women who had voices and space for speaking their minds, though the class and position of these women were clearly in regard to other Spanish creole elites – a call to fight femininity within her own socioeconomic class.

While Rodríguez de Tió lived in Cuba for the last twenty years of her life (1900-1926),⁴ her fight for Puerto Rican independence continued in the form of Cuba’s successful independence. From her childhood to adult political/literary endeavors, Rodríguez de Tió provides an understanding of how pro-independence activists sought to mold the culture of the Greater Antilles against the threats of the U.S and, in the cases of Puerto Rico and Cuba, the threat of Spain. A fighter with the expediency of her politically active family, class, and racial position as a white Spanish creole separatist, Rodríguez de Tió desired to uplift pre-Columbian indigenous history by including herself along with other Spanish creoles as a way to Eurocentricize and thus legitimize the islands by the approval of Europeans. Spanish creoles could thus escape their colonial history by claiming they had served an older settler Spain and were thus diasporic brothers and sisters to their fellow *borinqueños*. Spanish creole narratives provide a way to challenge the ways in which well-meaning, pro-independence activism took authority away from Afro-Latinx voices in order to represent Puerto Rico as strong and civil. Rodríguez de Tió’s life is one of many versions of diasporic groups placing other indigenous cultures into their own history. However, her role as a poet, her rise to fame using the term *Borinquén*, and her participation in

³ Toledo, Josefina. *Lola Rodríguez de Tió*. Ciudad de La Habana: Ediciones UNIÓN, 2007, 117-118.

⁴ Valdés, Vanessa Kimberly. *Diasporic Blackness: The Life and Times of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017, 37.

Puerto Rican and NYC activist groups offer a way to interpret the discourses that activists had over the whitening images of Puerto Rico during and after the fights for independence in the Greater Antilles. Rodríguez de Tió's poetry does not only aid our revisiting of independence literature as Eurocentric, but as political documents informed and avoidant of debates on race and class among the many walks of life in Puerto Rico – of people's *patria*, *borinquén*, and spiritual roots.

Author Commentary
Lucas René Ramos

I learned about the poet Lola Rodríguez de Tió from my mentor and Junior Paper advisor, Professor Robert Karl, who introduced me to Puerto Rican activist scholarship in his class, “U.S Imperialism in the Caribbean.” The topic of my paper formed through some deductive reasoning: I knew I wanted to analyze an individual “case study” in order to follow a larger trend, and I gravitated towards the Spanish-American War as a turning point where queer and gender studies entangled with modern conceptions of femininity/feminism. I also think that the discourse on diplomacy and war are usually male-centered, and Rodríguez de Tió’s poetry and letters offer a way to inject a female perspective in the same political spaces as her contemporaries. In doing so, I inevitably bring up issues of intersectionality, rootedness to cultural imaginaries, and privilege. I found sporadic articles mentioning Rodríguez de Tió but only one comprehensive biography that had been written on her life which needed updating. While my Spanish reading ability is proficient, the strongest difficulty of writing this paper was how to read Spanish literature (and especially poetry) in the context of the political letters she was circulating throughout her life.

This excerpt originally served as the introduction of my Junior Paper draft, because I thought that seeing Rodríguez de Tió near the end of her life would be a good retrospective before analyzing how she conceived the feminist ideologies she stood for. However, this format was too confusing, especially for a reader who is not versed in this type of literary-historical approach. I decided trace her life chronologically, instead. As a result, my conclusion is not a summary of my research: it is more of a critical perspective on how past scholarship treats female voices as exceptional, glorified legacies without their own political motives. More or less, Rodríguez de Tió is *not* recapturing the *borinquén* as told by her predecessors; rather, she creates subtle depictions of a Eurocentricized Puerto Rico to gain the respect of a “New Spain” and create political legitimacy through poetic imagery. There is quite a bit of ancestral confusion here, which is both purposeful and implicative of Puerto Rico’s nation-building at large. I ask my readers to look beyond her aesthetic decisions by seeing *how* that imagery was exploited throughout her life. My conclusion avoids repeating the importance of her poetry and is instead a political afterword, showing how her actions have been understood rather than as she had intended.

Editor Commentary
Paige Elizabeth Allen

Lucas takes on a large task in his Junior Paper: over the course of thirty pages, he aims to analyze the life of a Puerto Rican legend. Papers of this scope can often read like biography rather than as a motivated argument, but this is far from the case in Lucas's work. At the beginning of the paper, he states clearly why he is examining the life of Rodríguez de Tió: much of the historiography of this figure de-emphasizes her activism, oversimplifies her poetry, and lacks a critical and intersectional view of her works. Lucas establishes that he intends neither to infantilize nor worship Rodríguez de Tió; instead, her life serves as an ideal case study for many of the biggest historical issues of her day, including Puerto Rican independence and the whitening of the Puerto Rican identity by Spanish creoles. Throughout his paper, Lucas refines existing scholarship on Rodríguez de Tió and closely reads her poetry and letters through a political lens.

In his concluding section, Lucas completes the picture of Rodríguez de Tió for the reader, explaining the political views she came to develop regarding the ability of Puerto Rico and Cuba to match other world powers and her views on femininity. For a reader who has read the rest of the paper, these paragraphs serve to complete the picture of Rodríguez de Tió that has been forming through the earlier portions of the paper which correspond with earlier periods of her life.

Finally, Lucas ends with his true concluding paragraph. Here, Lucas expertly avoids excessive summary and instead lays out the major takeaways for the reader. Throughout the paper, Lucas zoomed into the details of Rodríguez de Tió's writings, but now he zooms out to look at the broad ideas that tie the paper together. Lucas restates succinctly the problematic aspects of Rodríguez de Tió's writings given her identity as a Spanish creole elite, establishing how his research has contributed to the scholarly conversation by refining existing views of this figure. He also points out the broader narrative of which this paper is a part, and he finishes by explaining why a methodology of this kind can help with the study of history. In short, Lucas justifies his motives (scholarly and global) and his methodology in his final paragraph, making for a satisfying and clear conclusion that reaches into the larger conversation while staying firmly grounded in the paper's subject.

Works Cited

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Bios

Lucas René Ramos '19 is a senior from Coral Springs, FL. He is a student in the Department of History with a track in Gender and Sexuality Studies. His independent work focuses on nationalism, queer studies, and semiotics. At Princeton, Lucas is a fellow of the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship and a former Senate member of the Undergraduate Student Government. He wrote this essay as a junior.

Paige Elizabeth Allen '21 is a sophomore from Mountain Top, Pennsylvania. She plans to concentrate in English and pursue certificates in Theater and Creative Writing. She is particularly interested in methods of storytelling, 19th-century literature, representations of gender and sexuality, and conceptions of death. Paige is actively involved with theater across campus and serves as President of Princeton University Players. In addition, she is an Orange Key Tour Guide, a reporter for *The Daily Princetonian*, and a member of the Wesley Foundation. She wrote this as a sophomore.