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MARYANNE L. LEONE

Trafficking and Consuming Sex in Global Spain: Facing Ethical Citizenship in Juan Bonilla’s Los príncipes nubios

Una mayor integración global, no solo de los países europeos sino también de los demás continentes, ha transformado el movimiento internacional de mercancías, instrumentos financieros, culturas y personas, para dar paso a inminentes desigualdades e injusticias sociales. Tras la incorporación de España a la Unión Europea, la mejora económica peninsular atrajo tanto a migrantes como a redes de traficantes de personas para instalarse en el país. Con base en el análisis de Los príncipes nubios (2003), de Juan Bonilla, y los conceptos de alteridad y lo ético de Emmanuel Levinas, este artículo indaga la sociedad consumista retratada en la novela y al protagonista-narrador, prototipo de la generación X y traficante de personas para fines sexuales. Analiza también la relación entre este y su familia, la comunidad y las personas traficadas, con el fin de arrojar luz sobre la responsabilidad ética del individuo cuyo entorno se encuentra entrelazado con el consumo desbordado y el individualismo.

Previously sought during Franco’s rule, Spain’s integration into the European Union signified the success of the nation’s newly formed democracy and its participation in the global market and political arena in contrast to the economic and cultural isolation of the dictatorship. Greater integration, not only in Europe but also across the globe, has shifted the borders that materials, goods, financial instruments, cultures, and, ultimately, people cross, which has reinforced and led to new inequalities. Until the economic crisis in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Spain’s economic position continually improved since joining the EU, which in turn attracted unprecedented numbers of migrants and also trafficking rings that have taken advantage of transnational mobility and vulnerabilities fomented by poverty, political instability, repressive regimes, and immigration laws and policing. Juan Bonilla’s 2003 novel Los príncipes nubios animates questions about the role of the individual, the nation, and community in a global world of social injustices and exploitative transnational movement with a particular focus on trafficking for prostitution.

Literary critics have included Juan Bonilla among the Generación X writers, which despite disagreement on the label and characteristics, typically refers to individuals born within the timeframe of the 1960s and the early 1970s whose
narratives evince a cynical, indifferent Spanish youth culture in the commodity-driven society of the nation's relatively recent democracy. Nina Molinaro's analyses of Generation X authors in relation to ethical responsiveness and responsibility to others and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas are particularly insightful for an understanding of Bonilla's Los principes nubios, which has not yet been studied in this light. Whereas many of Spain's male Generation X authors situate their characters within an isolated middle to upper-middle class Caucasian milieu, Bonilla's Los principes nubios places his middle-class male protagonist in a situation in which he repeatedly encounters others through his engagement with a global sex trafficking network. The main character travels the globe in search of beautiful people to recruit for prostitution in Spain; Albanians arriving in Brindisi, Argentinians financially ruined in their economic crisis at the turn of the millennium, or Mauritanians, Moroccans, or Sudanese who survive the trip by boat to Spain's southern shores; all are potential labour sources. While Los principes nubios centres on a Spanish protagonist and the social and political character of Spain at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the worldwide reach of the trafficking network brings to the forefront the international scope of forced migration for sexual exploitation and of sexual tourism.

My article addresses the constitution of the self and ethical posture of Bonilla's Generation X protagonist in the context of a sexualized, consumer-driven global culture in which human trafficking becomes a viable career for an apathetic youth. In a consumerist world view, with buying as the revered act, people are also purchasable goods, a reality which, taken to the extreme, results in serious human rights abuses such as trafficking. Ultimately, however, consumerism is an act performed by a consumerist person, and thus we must consider both the power and ethical responsibility of the individual. Bonilla's novel asks: what is the ethical responsibility of contemporary Spanish citizens before global inequalities given their position in a well-off society?

Bonilla's journalistic writing on immigration informed his work on this novel, yet it is precisely its fictional construction, and the narrative voice in particular, from which comes the work's power to incite critical reflection on the situation of immigrants in Spain and global sex trafficking (Bonilla, "Literatura"). The narrator-protagonist, Moisés Froissard Calderón, twenty-eight years old from Seville, contemplates how and why he came to traffic people. After finishing university studies, Moisés joins Artistas sin fronteras, an NGO dedicated to bringing theatrical performances to children living in extreme poverty. While on his first assignment, in Bolivia, Moisés learns of the Club Olimpo, a global organization that targets areas of crisis and seeks out the most beautiful people for high-end prostitution. His decision to work for the Club is unsurprising given his preference to earn money without much effort – be it selling sperm, distributing publicity, or seeking out movie parts as an extra. Moisés becomes one of the Club's most productive recruiters, or, to use his term, cazadores. As a result, the director of the Barcelona office, la Doctora, charges him with a special assignment: to find and bring her a Nubian, a man whose persecuted tribe originates in the Sudan and is known for the beauty of its people. Moisés's interactions with this Nubian man and other immigrants, particularly a woman from Mauritania named Nadim, who later calls herself Irene, eventually lead him to reassess his use of his privileged global position as a Spanish citizen for personal financial gain and power.

Moisés's matter-of-fact perspective on sex trafficking – free of ethical consideration – sets the narration's tone in the story's first lines: “Me dedicaba a salvar vidas. Así de fácil. Pensarán que exagero o que me las quiero dar de importante: están en su derecho, pero lo cierto es que me pagaban para salvar vidas, y cuantas más vidas salvaras más rico me haría” (11). Moisés judges his actions by financial rather than ethical measure. In a talk Bonilla gave in 2003, he commented on the novel's opening lines: "En un principio se pregunta si trabajar para ese burdel es una manera lícita de salvar la vida de algunos seres que se merecen algo más de lo que tienen, y se responde sencillamente que sí. Evidentemente, puede ser, o es, una trampa, porque lo único que quiere Moisés Froissard es salvarse a sí mismo” ("Literatura"). Bonilla's novel brings to the forefront a pivotal question debated among consumption theorists: Are people passive, helpless objects, manipulated by consumption culture, as for example Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue, or can and do individuals resist commoditization as Michel de Certeau and others assert? To what extent do the characters in Bonilla's novel passively accept a commodity-based society and to what degree do they resist being consumed in a world in which profit trumps human rights, media-based entertainment replaces social interaction, and indifference substitutes compassion? Moisés would like an omniscient narrator to tell his story and to occupy that distanced position in others' narratives, as his email password and dog's name indicate; yet, he himself must accept responsibility for his narration and his role in others' lives. To save himself, Moisés must move from passive acceptance of a consumer-driven culture to assuming his implication in the dehumanized existence that he sees in the world around him and acknowledging the distinctness of the Other; in other words, he must shift toward an ethical understanding of subjectivity.

Along with consumption theory, the writings of Jewish Lithuanian-French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas on ethics and alterity provide the fundament for my understanding of the protagonist-narrator's stance vis-à-vis the world that he inhabits and creates through his actions. Moisés Froissard Calderón presents a self-absorbed character whose Spanish roots locate him within a European identity and whose commercial activity aligns him with a global, Western-based consumer society. His cultural identity is significant when one considers that Levinas renounced Western philosophy's emphasis on
knowledge of the self, or Being, at the expense of the Other. The philosopher’s insistence on the role of alterity in the construction of the self is best understood in light of his relationship with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, phenomenologists under whom he studied in Freiburg, Germany, and whose work he spent his early career explicating, in publications that include the first book on Husserl in French in 1930 and the first article in French on Heidegger in 1932. Although Levinas would eventually distance himself from the philosophies of his teachers, Husserl’s “intentionality,” the notion that what we know of human existence derives from our perceptions of an object rather than from discovering stable essences, is fundamental to Levinas’s work. In contrast to the ahistoricism and atemporalities of Husserl, Heidegger provides for Levinas an understanding of Being located in time and space (Davis 7-12). While Husserl and Heidegger inform his development as a philosopher, Levinas’s imprisonment in military camps first in France and then in northern Germany during World War II, the extermination of many of his family members in the Nazi pogroms supported by Lithuanian nationalists, and Heidegger’s support of German National Socialism contribute to “a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy” (Levinas, Existence 19), as expressed in his first original book Existence and Essentients. For Levinas, the problem with Husserl and Heidegger is that “Qua phenomenology it remains within the world of light, the world of the solitary ego which has no relationship with the other qua other, for whom the other is another me, an alter ego known by sympathy, that is, by a return to oneself” (Existence 85). Instead of circling back to the self, Levinas argues in the following well-known passage that the subject’s constitution develops in an encounter with an Other that interrupts and challenges the so-called freedom of the self: “A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics” (Totality 43). Levinas thus turns away from understanding Being through the prioritization of the self and an assimilation of the Other, or what he calls interiority and the same, and he turns to face exteriority and alterity.

I use “face” intentionally. This Levinasian term, le visage, posits the presence of an Other whom the I faces, le face à face, yet whom the I cannot know nor reduce to a representation of the self. As referenced in the title of one of Levinas’s most important works, Totality and Infinity, an ethical relation proceeds from facing and recognizing the Other’s infiniteness rather than from totalizing that person: “It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity” (51); “Transcendence is not an optics, but the first ethical gesture” (174). As Levinas develops further in Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence, the I is not theoretical, nor is it consciousness, “knowing of oneself by oneself” (102), but a being who feels and senses, and thus has the potential to respond to the Other in a relation of “saying” (le dire), a “performative … expressive position of myself facing the other” (Critchley 18), in contrast to the “said” (le dit), which does not demand the presence of an interlocutor. Sensibility realizes a proximity to the other that must be present for an ethical relation to unfold. In Levinas’s words, “To be in relation with the other (autrui) face to face is to be unable to kill. It is also the situation of discourse” (“Ontology” 9). The other that remains Other in its resistance to the other’s grasp creates an “epiphany,” Levinas’s term by which a relation with the Other puts into question for the Self what he thinks he knows about himself, others, and the society in which he lives. To the contrary, when I fail to face the Other and fail to hear her call, I possess and consume the Other and ultimately, fail to constitute myself as an ethical subject.

At the end of her analysis of José Ángel Mañas’s Mensaka (1995) and Belén Gopegui’s Tocarnos la cara (1995), Molinaro (“Facing”) summarizes that although face-to-face relations figure prominently in these texts, in Gopegui’s novel the characters fail to see the Other as separate from the self and in Mañas’s, the self loses its grounding for failure to face the Other. She concludes her 2005 essay with the suggestion that the Generation X writers have yet to narrate an ethical relation such as Levinas envisions: “The face of the Other effectively turns away until some future moment, perhaps to be taken up again in other novels by the new generation of Peninsular narrators” (“Facing” 319). In “Looking for the Other” (2009), however, Molinaro finds that Luisa Castro’s La fiebre amarilla (1994) posits an ethical response to alterity. As I will argue in this essay, Bonilla’s Los principes nubios ultimately moves towards subjectivity grounded in an ethical encounter with an Other. My assertion may seem surprising given that Bonilla’s protagonist engages in sex trafficking. Indeed, for the majority of the narration, the character exemplifies a reflection of the self back upon the self in an ontology that rejects an expressive facing towards alterity. The novel’s ending, however, suggests that the narrator experiences an ethical epiphany.

Levinas’s assertion that sensibility precedes an ethical relation reveals a fundamental deficiency in the protagonist of Los principes nubios that helps to explain his consumptive practices. Reflecting on the narration in progress, Moisés notes that his is neither a sentimental nor social novel. While it would make a great story, he will not fall in love with nor save the Nubian Boo. Not only in narration, but also in action, Moisés divests himself of sentiment; at least that is his stated intention. Working in Bolivia with Artistas sin fronteras, Moisés asks his fellow artists: “¿De verdad pensáis que merece la pena lo que hacemos?, ¿de verdad creéis que con unas cuantas carantoñas y unas narices de payaso y pintándonos la cara de blanco, estamos ayudando a salvar a alguien?” (30). Moisés views as naïve the other members’ attempts to answer these questions affirmatively. The helplessness he feels leads him to try not to feel at
all. To that end, he decides that the Club Olimpo suits him better, with its directive to avoid emotional attachment: “lo mejor es no hablar mucho, no oir nada, limitarse a buscar, cazar, entregar y cobrar” (40-41). Moisés’s coldness towards others stems from his family, who sees sensitivity as weakness. The protagonist recounts that when watching the film Magnolia with his family, he burst into tears upon hearing one of the character’s say “Tengo mucho amor que dar” (17) and began repeating the line himself. While his mother acts in kindness, taking a blanket from her lap and placing it on her son, Moisés’s father and brother ridicule him. His father has emphasized to his sons that one has only oneself in the world, and Moisés and his brother consequently view their mother’s depression as her problem alone: “ya está madre otra vez con lo suyo” (18). A strategy to survive this world then is to become less human and make those with whom one interacts less like individuals and more like commodities.

Lacking emotional support from his family, Moisés looks to the media to imagine a self that garners social acceptance, every night conducting an imaginary interview with an always-beautiful interviewer whom he will inevitably seduce, he fantasizes himself someone worthy of the media’s attention: the winner of the Grand Slam or the Tour de France, the photographer who captures the attempted assassination of a pope, an archaeologist who discovers Christ’s remains or someone who wins the love of a Hollywood star. Levinas posits, however, that we exist in relationship to and for others, and must assume responsibility to and for the Other before we can form a sense of self as an individual and in relation to the broader world in which we exist. The encounter with the Other is at the core of our very existence, constituting Being as human. Instead of turning toward the people whom he encounters while on an NGO mission in Bolivia and whom he perceives as different from himself, Moisés opts to turn away from the misery that he sees and that induces him to cry. Although he indeed may not be able to change the extreme poverty in which the children and adults that he meets live, stripping himself of sensibility serves only himself; in a false easing of his conscience, he characterizes trafficking as saving lives and prefers an easier, more glamorous imagined reality than the actual one.

In buying the illusion that the Club Olimpo saves lives, Moisés accepts that consumption will provide salvation more readily than the work of religious or NGO missions. Consumer theorists Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (xv) suggest that religiosity has become rearticulated as consumption. If, as Jean Baudrillard argues, in a consumer society, consumption structures society – it is not merely an element therein – then consumerism rather than religion underpins society’s ethical framework: “Consumption is a system which secures the ordering of signs and the integration of the group: it is therefore both a morality (a system of ideological values) and a communication system, a structure of exchange” (Consumer 78). When Moisés is on his first assignment, taking advantage of the economic crisis in Argentina, he makes the argument that his work will distribute global wealth and political freedom more equitably. Then, noting society’s cynicism, he dismisses the rationale: “Oh, qué blandita es toda esa argumentación, nos va a hacer llorar, dirán ustedes... ¿Está bien, está mal? Eran preguntas que carecían de sentido... La única pregunta moral correcta de los tiempos que nos tocaron es: ¿es rentable lo que vas a hacer, ¿obtendrá beneficios?” (p8). Moisés’s characterization of his times concords with Baudrillard’s description of a society in which consumerism has become the reigning ideology.14

Baudrillard argues that objects take on meaning independent of the thing consumed ("Ideological" 61). Unlike a gift, in which the relationship between the giver and the gifted is significant and thus the particular object conveys symbolic meaning, any one object of consumption is substitutable for another. While social relations are apparent with the gift, the social relations of labour and production become invisible with the commodity. In other words, “the object-become-sign no longer gathers its meaning in the concrete relationship between two people” (59). In a society in which people themselves have become commodities, as we see in this novel, the implications of this social disconnection are much greater. Object and labour are conflated in the individuals whose bodies become a commodity for consumption. As commodity, one human being can be substituted for another and the human relation with that person, now object, disappears.

Moisés’s practice of taking photographs emphasizes emotional distancing and commoditization of persons. When performing with the theatrical NGO in Bolivia, he takes photographs of impoverished conditions and people and then later, while trafficking persons, of the people whom he recruits; in so doing, the camera separates him from his surroundings and turns the circumstances and people into objects of the camera and of his gaze. Rather than considering the happiness, albeit momentary, that he brings to the children in his performances, Moisés surmises that the only benefit that will come of his time in the La Paz slums will be selling the photos to a Spanish magazine for some profit. While certainly the images might inform Spaniards of the horrendous situation, the photographs turn the place, conditions, and people into objects that can be consumed without any commitment to human rights issues. Just as the imagined races that he devises as he passes people on the sidewalk, Moisés dreams, too, that the photographs will gain him fame, a desired end in a consumer society. The novel’s emphasis on the connections between consumption, fame, and immigration brings up the question of whether cultural products such as photographs, literature, and films exploit immigrants, as trafficking representations sold and moved through domestic and international markets. The cover of Bonilla’s novel itself, with its image of a
dark-skinned person covered in a white shroud against a blue sky, appeals to the public's curiosity about immigration, which at the time of publication was heightened by daily news of revisions to Spain's immigration laws and of people arriving in pateras.

Strikingly, Levinas speaks of "the possession and ... the consumption of the object" ("Ontology" 7) in relation to the failure of an ontological relation of comprehension to produce subjectivity. In "Is Ontology Fundamental?" (1), an essay that introduces concepts that Levinas will expand upon in Totality and Infinity, he contends that the ethical occurs in a relation that is beyond comprehension, unlike Heidegger's thesis that understanding originates in a reference to a universal Being prior to individual existence. For Levinas, comprehension implies an erasure of the Other in an egotistical confirmation of the self that possesses and consumes others. In contrast, the ethical involves a linguistic relation: "The person with whom I am in relation I call being, but in so calling him, I call to him. I do not only think that he is, I speak to him ... I have neglected the universal being that he incarnates in order to remain with the particular being he is" ("Ontology" 7). Levinas (8) names the ethical paradigm of calling to and listening to the other religion, understood not in a theological but in a social sense. If religion, as the ethical relation, is an interchange between beings in which one does not exhibit power over the other, the new religion - consumption - is antithetical to Levinas's ethics.

In Los príncipes nubios, the language that the narrator and the director of the Club use, referring to the sex workers as a "pieza" or "caza" (45), reveals a dehumanized perspective in which an ethical relation is absent. To the Club's Directora, an immigrant from Africa is merely "otra náufraga" (45). Moisés views the "piezas" as merchandise whose value he estimates on a ten-point scale, a practice that underscores the commoditization of human beings. Moisés observes, referring to one of the trafficked women, Nadim: "los especialistas del Club eran capaces de convertir una aparente pieza vulgar en una imitación más que digna de un diamante" (46). This comparison of people to diamonds highlights an exploitative exchange in which individuals consume a product that is often trafficked and that funds civil wars in Africa, human rights abuses, and worker exploitation. Proposing that Nadim might replicate a diamond suggests, too, a commodity paradigm, for the original no longer figures in the exchange.

As Daniel Miller explains, consumption is more about social differentiation than fulfilling needs:

Objective culture has become unimaginably vast, producing goods largely as symbols of wealth and fashion, often models of oppressive social differentiation ... Baudrillard and the critics of post-modernism provide the clearest account of this sense of the complete interchangeability of things, implying also a reduction of human relations to this exchange cycle of style. (189)

A case in point, the Club Olimpo of Bonilla's novel positions its business in the luxury retail market, selling only the best merchandise, specifically beautiful highly-trained sex workers, differentiating its "goods" from the more profane venues of street prostitution, roadside clubs, or bares de alterne. Indeed, the Club Olimpo calls the trafficked individuals "modelos" (14) and the most desirable recruits imitate models, athletes, and actors. In consuming "modelos," clients, in turn, buy status and access to these symbols of wealth and fame. Beauty has become the ultimate consumer object and "an absolute, religious imperative" (Consumer 132), argues Baudrillard; and while Baudrillard fails to recognize sufficiently the media's role in women's quest for beauty, his assertion that "[beauty] is a sign, at the level of the body, that one is a member of the elect, just as success is such a sign in business" (Consumer 132), expresses the value system that Moisés and the Club espouse and that makes for a successful business. Under this differentiation, those who qualify as beautiful garner a greater price, yet the consumer system oppresses equally individuals working for the high-end Club Olimpo and those working on Madrid's Castellana, Calle Montera, or in the Casa de Campo. The Club aims to erase the individuality of the persons it "captures," and transform them into not only the commodity, but also the instrument of production. For example, Moisés reflects on Boo as follows: "en los servicios que rindiera a favor del Club nunca practicaría sexo entre hombres, era siempre sexo entre una máquina y la sed de un cliente: en realidad los modelos no eran otra cosa que máquinas de refrescos, carísimas máquinas de refrescos" (254). Treating human beings as objects - commodities and machines to generate profit - denies the uniqueness of each person and dismisses the suffering that results from extreme economic differentiation, political repression, and natural disasters across the globe.

Up until this point, I have focused on the protagonist's participation in and perception of the Club Olimpo and a consumer-dominated society. I would like to consider now how the characters that are trafficked react to and resist being consumed. The narration highlights that, while Moisés portrays his work as saving lives, most join him reluctantly and many seek ways to subvert their objectification. Though several examples of resistance emerge in the narration, Boo's story illustrates well the continuation of European colonization under the new rubric of a consumer society, and of defiance of that oppression. When Moisés explains that he will save Boo's life by selling sex for a high price, Boo responds with a traditional Nubian story that makes clear the historical exploitation of his people, their boldness, and his pride in Nubian culture. With obvious parallels to contemporary trafficking, Boo recounts that, many years ago, white hunters came to his village and kidnapped the most beautiful man,
his great-grandfather. This warrior was transported across the ocean to a zoo, where he was exhibited alongside a monkey. Bonilla's narrative focuses on human trafficking, yet Boo's story also reminds us that animals suffer commoditization as exotic products bought and sold for visual consumption. We might also think of soccer games such as the 2012 Eurocopa in which it is alleged that some 200 to 300 Spanish fans made monkey sounds when the Italian player Mario Balotelli had possession of the ball during the Spain-Italy game (Armstrong; "Investigan"; Scott-Eliott). Although the zoo's visitors first protested Boo's great-grandfather's placement in a cage and asked that he be free to roam within the zoo, they soon complained that they could not easily see him and began to pursue him. The warrior killed a visitor in self-defence, faced vengeful attacks, and ended his life by jumping off a roof with his eyes open. For Boo, this tale represents his people's will to maintain their dignity and their right to use violence to protect their own person and counter their subjugation.

When Boo fights white men during the illegal boxing matches that exploit and right to use violence to protect their own person and counter their subjugation.

Though not a pure correlation, Boo's story is suggestive of the resistance that Leivinas contends must occur for an ethical meeting of the Same and the Other. The tale's fable-like quality - "hace mucho tiempo, cuando el mundo era todavía una superficie lisa" (228) - establishes a tone that anticipates a moral lesson. The grandfather's fight to protect his life belies the white hunters' and zookeeper's presumed knowledge of him. They expected that he would passively accept their co-option of his self for their own ends; yet, Boo's grandfather resists the whites' representation of him as someone inferior to them in his humanness. The violent response of the grandfather and of Boo's fighting and later rape of Moises do not follow a Levinasian ethics however: "At the very moment when my power to kill realizes itself, the other (autrui) has escaped me ... I have not looked at him in the face" ("Ontology" 9). Bonilla's perpetuation of a stereotype of the violent character of the African deserves critique, as Pérez-Sánchez and Folkart have argued. In the story-telling scene nonetheless, Boo confronts Moises with narrative instead of with physical violence. Boo's tale serves to call Moises to face him rather than absorb him into the Club and its sub-human treatment of others. After hearing the story, Moises first responds with the rhetoric of better opportunity, ignoring the lesson of Boo's tale of exploitation, but then, immediately following this speech, voices a very different response, one that reveals that he indeed has heard Boo. The light from a fire truck illuminates Boo's face and Moises's cynical posture dissipates: "Lo que de veras me apetecia decirle era: vamos, Boo, salgamos de aquí, al carajo todo, las peleas, la lluvia, la puta basura, el puto Club Olimpo, salgamos de aquí ... yo te ayudo" (230). The pouring rain reminding him of the

raining frogs in Magnolia, Moisés's thoughts return to his emotional distress, his deep sense that he had "much love to give," and his mother's sympathetic response. Although he relates the moment with cynicism, characterizing himself "como uno de los patéticos personajes" (232), the prior internal thought of leaving the world of trafficking and exploitation suggests that he would like to respond to Boo's ethical tale with love and that such a response might bring the human connection for which he longs. Boo longs to return to his childhood, when his reality consisted of local activities such as caring for a herd of sheep or painting his face with ash for festivities, and when life seemed fair. The childhood and town that Boo recalls no longer exist, as he himself recognizes; however, in a global society in which people move both voluntarily and forcibly, ethically grounded interactions among people would lay the groundwork for community.

Levinas's face-to-face involves a two-way conversation, and ultimately in this scene Moisés does not answer the ethical demand that Boo presents him. Returning to himself, he keeps his thoughts silent and suppresses his vulnerability and sensitivity to the Other before him. The biblical rain that falls as Moisés and Boo leave Málaga for Barcelona, where Boo will join the Club, alludes to the protagonist's missed opportunity to enter into a transcendent, infinite relation that would move him from totality and that would create a different path for Boo. The protagonist thinks that he sees Boo walk on water, but he misses what might be characterized as a spiritual call to respond ethically: "Vi cómo se alejaba, como si levitase sobre las aguas, como si pudiese apoyar el pie sin hundirlor en la superficie liquida" (235). Although Leivinas enjoins that in an ethical encounter the Same does not envelop the Other, the mystical differentness that Moisés now perceives dissolves the proximity that he had felt when he listened to Boo's tale of his grandfather. As the plane takes off, Moisés remarks that the garbage that fills the flooding streets below represents his opinion of the world, his world, "una ciudad enterrada en su propia basura" (237). Extrapolating from the personal to the communal, the comment critiques Spain's failure to create a hospitable and civil environment for immigrants instead of using and disposing of them. Moisés moves toward alterity in this scene, but ultimately remains a driving force in the symbolic rain that drowns Spanish society below.

Towards the end of his narration, Moisés announces that he has made two important discoveries: the first is that while eating sunflower seeds he can disengage from his surroundings and invent a reality better than the one he is living; the second is that rather than a superhero, today's Übermensch is simply the common man who gets up at seven, drives in traffic to a poorly paid job that matters nothing to him, and goes home to a family of strangers, whose only desire is that the TV entertain them. This Ubermensch does not get angry about
the world in which he lives, but instead uses others' misery to his benefit, without a guilty conscience.

Although Moisés suggests disengagement as a solution to individual angst, signs of individual conscience and social consciousness surface throughout his narration, even when he maintains a consumerist perspective and fails to fulfill an ethical obligation to the Other. To illustrate, when a man compares immigrants to garbage accumulating in the streets during a strike, Moisés remarks to himself that people incorrectly judge ethnic others based on isolated experiences: “están por todas partes ... es una epidemia, peor que la basura ... A mí, una vez me quisieron robar la cartera” (142). He not only criticizes this man, but also recognizes his own culpability in these assumptions. Further, Moisés critiques the ill-preparedness of the Spanish government and ineffective immigration policies, which lead to many deaths as immigrants attempt to enter Spain illegally, and he notes the dehumanized reporting in media, which emphasizes statistics. Paradoxically, his proximity to the plights of immigrants globally, due to his role as a trafficker, has led him to understand better than people with little or no direct contact the circumstances that underlie economic migration and exploitation. Nonetheless, despite the greater sensitivity that Moisés shows in this scene to the plight of immigrants, given the opportunity to engage in a conversation about the situation in Spain and the broader issue of world poverty and global exploitation, Moisés remains silent instead of actively engaging in a discussion with people who voice racism. Worse still, the protagonist benefits financially from exploiting illegal immigrants from all over the world whom he traffics to Spain for prostitution. Although Moisés purports to have anesthetized himself, he is not immune to the harm that he causes others: his body rejects the dehumanizing sexualized consumer culture in which he participates, targeting his sexual organs, which become impotent and itch intensely every night.18 Still, at this point in the narration, the protagonist lives with physiological punishment rather than changing his behavior.

Contrary to the Club’s advice, Moisés inquires about the life stories of several people whom he recruits, which in turn produces fissures in the emotional distance that he maintains. We have already discussed the episode in which Boo tells of his grandfather, probing Moisés to consider leaving the Club and helping Boo. Concerned for Irene, Moisés contemplates marrying her so that she will not choose the Club as a way to gain residency in Spain. Moisés also fantasizes that Boo and Irene will fall in love and pay to watch them have sex together, convinced that he will see their love expressed sexually, yet imperfectly, as human beings rather than as automated sex: “Se amarán cuando fallen ante mí, lo sé, no me preguntes por qué lo sé, pero lo sé” (264).19 In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas differentiates between need and desire, with the former enacting a consumption of the other and the latter engaged in erotic love that maintains the individuality of each person: “Desire is desire for the absolutely other” (34). Moisés wishes to experience desire, sensitivity toward the Other, but he does not recognize that purchasing love will, at best, satisfy a need rather than fill his emotional void. Instead of showing love, Boo seizes the opportunity to attack Moisés, beating him to unconsciousness, sodomizing him, and leaving him for dead with his head in a toilet.20 Escaping from Moisés’s apartment and hence the Club, Boo and Irene take his camera, an instrument that imposes an objectifying gaze and that Moisés has used to record the seventy-three people he has hunted until that point. With these actions, Boo and Irene defy Moisés’s consumptive objectification of them and also his determination to possess knowledge about their interior selves. However, they will pay dearly for resisting their oppression, repatriated to their respective countries where they likely will suffer severe consequences. Returning to Levinas, an ethically constituted subject does not seek to know or represent the Other, but rather respect the sovereignty of the Other. Moisés often finds himself surprised when trafficked people contradict his assumption of gratitude for saving them.

Intermittent disruptions of “self-enclosed totality” (Davis 32), which might be thought of as *le dire*, the saying, lead Moisés to recognize local and global injustices and his implication in them, instead of viewing them as *le dit*, that which is already stated and unchangeable. In the final pages of the narration, Moisés receives a call from a civil guard notifying him of a rescued boat with three-dozen Africans, among them one person worthy of his consideration for prostitution. Moisés finds Boo, vulnerable, crouched in a cell, his body and teeth shaking, yet defiant, matching Moisés’s gaze, and learns that Irene has returned as well, one year since their repatriation. He considers exacting vengeance by sending Boo back to Africa while immigration policy would allow Irene, pregnant with Boo’s child, to remain in Spain. However, Moisés makes a different choice. Boo’s story of his grandfather, his violation of Moisés, the crosses that Moisés finds next to the names of those who committed suicide on a list of the Club Olimpo’s prostitutes, and other acts of defiance by people trafficked have created fissures in Moisés’s indifferent veneer. Boo’s and Irene’s return to Spain, and thus refusal to assume Moisés’s and the trafficking ring’s authority to repatriate them, calls to Moisés, and he responds with sensitivity after having ignored many opportunities to otherwise resist an exploitative material culture. Rather than passively accepting a consumption-based society, he renounces his position in the Club Olimpo and frees Boo.21 Boo’s and Irene’s defiance of a commoditized position in their decision to return, rather than let the Club decide their future, saves not only themselves but also others whom Moisés would have trafficked.

Levinas’s philosophy of the ethical does not prescribe rules to guide decisions; rather he describes an ethical demand to which we must respond in order to instantiate ourselves as human subjects. The Other who faces me
teaches me that an egotistical focus on the self limits my freedom and power. If
I face and listen to the Other without possessing the Other, I allow for an ethical
encounter that makes me aware that a world exists exterior to me: “Instead of
offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it. As nonviolence
it nonetheless maintains the plurality of the same and the other. It is peace”
(Totality 203).22 In meeting Boo’s direct gaze, Moisés accepts the challenge that
Boo presents to his sense of Self, opts for a non-violent response, and, in
recognizing Boo’s individuality, he realizes an ethical encounter with the Other.
Although Moisés claims himself impervious to self-critique because he
accepts rather than to seek to understand. As Nina Molinaro
deciphers his father pronouncing the word “canalla” and he assumes the label:
“Me miré en el espejo retrovisor y aprobar el insulto, pronuncié: Moisés
Froisard Calderón, La Florida 15, tercer B, canalla” (291). Although the reader
does not know how Moisés will engage in society going forward, this revised
self-characterization acknowledges the protagonist’s inhumane treatment of
people in vulnerable social positions. Nonetheless, as a citizen of a developed
nation to which, at least until recently, citizens of less developed nations have
sought to immigrate, is this recognition enough? Bridget Anderson, who
studies immigration enforcement and trafficking in the United Kingdom,
suggests that “rather than rescuing people because we know best,” we might
instead recognize “the laws and practices” that lead “sovereign selves ... into
excessive dependencies, on individuals who can thereby do them harm” (125).
Bonilla’s Los príncipes nubios suggests that instead of passively accepting
the consumer society in which we live, we instead must recognize our responsibility
in consumerist culture and the inequities of our global world, and our
governments must do the same. For social justice to occur in response to global
sex trafficking, many people around the world will have to look directly at the
eyes of the Other; the alternative being that we all become machines.

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NOTES

1 The United Nations defines trafficking in persons as the use of coercion, deception,
vulnerability, or payment to recruit and transport men, women, or children across
international borders or within a country for prostitution and other forms of sexual
exploitation or for labour, servitude, or the removal of organs. For a complete
definition, see the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes website. Among
others, Spanish authors who have addressed trafficking and sexual exploitation
include Lourdes Ortiz in “La piel de Marcelinda” (1998), Lucía Etxebarría in Una
historia de amor como otra cualquiera (2003), and Eduardo Mendicutti in Los
novios búlgaros (1993).

2 Although writers José Ángel Mañas and Ray Loriga have garnered the spotlight,
Juan Bonilla is among the writers often cited when this generation is discussed and
Carmen de Urioste has examined his Nadie conoce a nadie (1956) in this context.
Urioste maintains that unlike the characteristic passive reception that Spanish
Generation X narratives elicit, Bonilla’s text calls for an active reader and
sequently counters the trend of representing reality as a simulacrum to merely
accept rather than to seek to understand. As Nina Molinaro (“Facing” 304;
“Looking” 135-37) has cogently argued, the narrow association of “hard realism”
with this group has excluded women writers from a more extensive critical
3 Alberto Villamandos convincingly argues that colonialist and capitalist perspectives converge in Los principes nubios to reduce the immigrant subject to a spectacular pornographic body and that these suggest the crisis of modern identity. Concurrent with my reading, Gema Pérez-Sánchez affirms the novel’s ethical objective and complex literary project. She develops an insightful analysis of intertextuality with Spain’s picaresque and post-war neopicaresque traditions to reveal homophobia and racism and, ultimately, the text’s failure to realize inclusivity with Spain’s LGBTQ and irregular immigrant populations. Jessica Folkart presents a fascinating study of “liminal organs . . . and bodily emissions” (246) to discuss the novel’s representation of homosexual desire and of African immigrants as the scatological abject whom Spaniards reject in order to claim “the integrity of Spanish identity” (272). For a study of Bonilla’s journalistic writing, see Eva Navarro Martínez.

4 I wish to thank my colleague in philosophy, Molly Flynn, for sharing her thoughts on ethical responsibility and the consumerist person.

5 Pérez-Sánchez, Folkart, and Villamandos note the irony of the biblical association of the protagonist’s first name with a saviour. Pérez-Sánchez points out that the proximity of Froissard to the words froisser, se froisser, and froissant—which mean respectively to offend, to take offence, and to be uncivil—all relate to Moisés’s character. The second last name, Calderón, alludes to similarities between the Golden Age writer’s criticism of greed in imperial Spain and Bonilla’s critique of the same in twenty-first century global Spain. For more analysis of these names, see Sánchez-Pérez.

6 Critics have noted the association between the Club’s name and pleasure for a select elite (Pérez-Sánchez; Villamandos 199).

7 For theorists who examine resistance to global consumer cultures, see for example Duane Elgin, Angela McRobbie, and Kalle Lasn.

8 Moisés’s password is “Narrador Omniscente,” until he changes it to “Zaratustra” (284) to reflect his revision of Nietzsche’s Übermensch. “Narrador Omniscente” (76), the name he calls his girlfriend’s Rottweiler, refuses to cooperate with Moisés when he returns to her apartment to collect his camera and other possessions after they have broken up, presenting instead a threatening growl. Moisés kills the dog and thus, as he later remarks several times, obliterates his recourse to a distanced, all-knowing narrator.

9 Levinas employs a complex, circling, fragmentary writing to express his rejection of totality, that is the idea that we can know an Other. As one commentator remarks, “alterity turns out to be not only the theme of Levinas’s text, but also the key to its complex textual performance” (Davis 56). Scholars of his work have proved indispensable in my understanding of Levinas’s philosophical evolution and ideas on ethics and the Other. My exposition of Levinas draws on Simon Critchley, Colin Davis, and Michael B. Smith, yet equivocations in the interpretation of Levinas are my own. Because the commentary by these three scholars overlaps, I cite only when an idea comes from one of the authors alone. References to Totalité et infini: Essai sur l’extériorité (1961) and Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence (1974) are cited from the translations to English by Alphonso Lingis.

10 Levinas uses autrui to refer to a human being whereas autre refers to the non-human (Critchley 16). Levinas’s inconsistent use of capital and small letters, and the English translation of “other” for both terms has led some scholars and translators to follow the convention of using “Other” where Levinas refers to Autrui or autrui and “other” where he has used Autre or autre. Some critics place the original text in parenthesis after the English “Other” or “other” (Basic xiv-xv; Totality 24-25). I have followed the convention of using “Other” to refer to the human Autrui and autrui, and have maintained the translator’s choice when citing.

11 Levinas published Existence and Existents in 1947. His extensive œuvre on alterity, existence, subjectivity, and Judaism encompasses dozens of book-length studies, individual articles, and collections of essays, interviews and lectures.

12 Levinas introduces the terminology le dire and le dit in Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence, his second major work, in response to a critique by Jacques Derrida in “Violence and Metaphysics” that the ontological language in Totality and Infinity binds him within the paradigm that he critiques and seeks to escape (Critchley 17-18). For more on sensibility and proximity and their implication in a responsibility for the other, see chapters 3 and 4 of Otherwise than Being.

13 I first wrote this essay with a sole focus on the implications of a consumption-driven society for the attitude that Bonilla’s protagonist adopts towards sex trafficking, his self, and his role within a global world. Molinaro’s pioneering study of novels of several Generation X writers in light of Levinas’s ethical construction of subjectivity illuminated for me a path to delve more deeply into the ethical posture of Bonilla’s leading character. My exposition of Levinas’s theories shares commonalities with Molinaro’s, but my analysis of a different author and text necessarily diverges from her essays.

14 In the style of Ramón del Valle-Inclán, the novel distances the reader from the protagonist with an esperpentic exaggeration that critiques the social reality represented (Bonilla, “Literatura”; Folkart 352; Pérez-Sánchez, “What happens”).

15 I thank Gema Pérez-Sánchez (Message) for encouraging me to consider Boo’s violent behaviour in relation to Levinasian ethics.
16 The book’s cover, as described earlier, presents a mystical figure reaching out his hand in a call to the reader.

17 Folkart (254–56) argues that physiological metaphors in the novel’s description of a contaminated, diseased Málaga reveal a desire in Spain to expel African immigrants.

18 For Folkart, the skin manifests hidden guilt and homosexual desire. Pérez-Sánchez notes the same, and associates “el picor” (81) and the verb picar etymologically with the pícaro.

19 Folkart (265–66) suggests that Moisés obscures his homosexuality with longing for the couple.

20 Drawing on Diana Flesler’s and Patricia Grieve’s studies on Spanish views of Moroccans, Pérez-Sánchez connects this scene to a recurring fear and fantasy of sodomy in Spanish cultural products that stems from interpretations of King Rodrigo’s rape of Cava Florinda and Count Julian’s revenge by allowing Moors to invade Peninsular Spain. Pérez-Sánchez is critical of this scene and of Bonilla for evoking sympathy for immigrants through the figure of a heterosexual man who uses violence against the impotent Moisés, who is ashamed of his homosexual desires.

21 Rather than the culmination of an ethical calling, other critics view Moisés’s decision to not repatriate Boo and Irene as abrupt (Pérez-Sánchez, “What happens”; Villamandos 209). Pérez-Sánchez points out that Bonilla attempts to save Moisés from amorality with this turn of plot, but critiques the granting of power to Moisés in order to save the heterosexual immigrant couple. Folkart asserts that Boo and Moisés “look at another, as equal subjects, equal in their abjection” (270); however, she assumes that Moisés releases Boo with the expectation that he will return to illegal fighting. I suggest that Moisés begins to realize his humanity with this ethical response.

22 For more on Levinas’s repudiation of violence see Davis (48–52).

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