

## NINE

# Porfirio Rubirosa

## Masculinity, Race, and the Jet-Setting Latin Male

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So I have not seen in the colorful obituaries of the late Rubirosa in the American press, any reference to race. Had he been an American citizen by birth, the headlines probably would have read: NEGRO PLAYBOY DIES.

Langston Hughes, "Commentary," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, July 24, 1965

Porfirio Rubirosa (1909–1965), the legendary Dominican playboy known for his suave, seductive charm, died early in the morning on July 5, 1965, when he crashed his dashing Ferrari into the trees at Paris's Bois de Boulogne after all-night celebrating and heavy drinking at "Jimmy's," the well-known Paris club. The death of Rubirosa—or Rubi, as he was popularly known—was emblematic of his peripatetic life. The 1950s Latin lover *par excellence*, an international symbol of masculinity and sexuality, died in the city of his greatest sexual exploits, at the wheel (he had been, after all, a well-known race-car driver) and following a glittering late-night party honoring the winning team in the Coupe de France polo cup, a sport in which he had attained world-class player status. Rubirosa's life ended "fittingly," according to the *New York Times* (Grimes 2005). Yet for Langston Hughes, perhaps then the United States' leading African American writer, news of the death finally opened up the possibility of addressing that crucial race question: Rubirosa was "a front page face out of international news, one of the famous playboys of the Western World. And not white!" (Hughes).

Although questions of race surfaced only peripherally during Rubirosa's twenty-five-year career as the world's most famous lover, it is precisely the race of his face (and the face of the race) that most interested and concerned Hughes, and it is this discussion of race and mobility to which we would like to return. As part of a larger project on Rubirosa's hyper-masculinity and problematically racialized subjectivity, here we emphasize the proliferation of meanings at play in the non-Dominican (US and European) perspective of Rubirosa's iconicity. Our aim is to address Rubirosa's status as a Latin American icon through three interrelated lenses. First we will read his face as an icon that indexes complex discourses of racialization in the Dominican Republic, the United States, and internationally. Such racial

semantics propelled Rubirosa's movement both socially and physically through the spaces of international modernity. Secondly, we will conceptualize Rubirosa's mobility, his association with technologies of movement and speed (his career as race-car driver and amateur pilot), and contiguously, a globe-trotting Don Juanism he deployed through a sexuality of conquest (as seen through the series of high-profile affairs with celebrities and heiresses). Finally, we will consider the persistent reverence in which he is still held as an icon of Dominican maleness (chiefly through the focus of one ardent admirer, Dominican musical star Johnny Pacheco). This discussion of Rubi's body, and by extension, of his ability to pass or not into the invisibility or naturalness of whiteness, can help us critically approach and re-engage the representations of a man who has come to represent the international—"macho's macho."<sup>1</sup>

### The Iconicity of the Face

Rubirosa's perpetually smiling face and elegantly clad body are keys to understanding the compelling gravitational pull of a countenance that emerges from the intersection of a cosmopolitan "white" identity and a racialized Dominican hypersexuality. Rubi's face was a signifier of both individual male identity and group identity, in this case both Dominican and international. As such, the way in which his face and body were commodified, marketed, and fetishized through hundreds of articles and photographs in the international press illuminates the tensions between the social and psychic production of subjects.

In his article about Rubirosa and race, Langston Hughes focuses on the intersections between a trajectory that found the latter "on the receiving end when divorce time came" so that he had "died with a golden spoon in his mouth" (a trajectory that implied "whiteness") and his own perception of the famous playboy as "a handsome colored boy" (Hughes). Hughes's placing of Rubirosa's "race" within the context of international politics is telling, since it points to a disconnection between differing American and international acceptances of racial hybridity at the official and popular levels. Hughes, who had two memorable encounters with Rubirosa in New York City, compared him to controversial Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr., himself a light-skinned, often-married charmer: "In his youth, Rubirosa was a handsome colored boy. In middle age, he was still good looking, dashing and dynamic. He must have possessed the same sort of personality attraction for women as does our Congressman from Harlem, Adam Clayton Powell, who, although Negro, is several shades lighter in complexion than was Rubirosa" (1965).

For Hughes, Rubirosa's social success—his access to places from which the likes of him were barred on racial grounds in Jim Crow America—rested on his Dominican identity, a Latin identity that protected him politically from racial classifications that would have proven socially excluding in the United States and Europe. "Mulatto Latins," Hughes wrote,

in their own Caribbean or South American lands, are not classed as Negro in the U.S.A. sense of the term, especially if their tongue is Spanish. American military records class even black Puerto Ricans as "white" which creates considerable confusion at Southern Army posts. But apparently Washington dares

not apply the word NEGRO (which in Spanish means BLACK) to Latins against their will. We have enough problems with Latin America now in maintaining a clean American image. (Hughes 1965)

Hughes refers to the fact that in midcentury, both on US soil and in the Dominican Republic, Hispanicity was an alternative to blackness. US and international journalistic readings of Rubi saw Hispanicity as a whitening agent.<sup>2</sup> Thus, although Hughes saw Rubi as an undeniably “colored” man, he astutely recognized the complex categorizations of Rubi’s race, which triangulated from white (as seen in the Dominican Republic), to Hispanic and therefore colored but not black (as seen in the United States), to American and formerly colonized (as seen in Europe). Whereas Rubi’s whiteness was an achieved status, despite his mulatto-ness, in the United States there was no escape from, or passing on, the fact of blackness. For Hughes, this arguing for the fact of blackness was a political stance he took alongside his smirk of appreciation for Rubirosa’s ironic accomplishment. Even if he could not dupe Hughes, Rubi had duped many. In this sense, his face proffered a strategic ambiguity and allowed for “purposeful self-presentation strategies and for equivocation in dynamic interplay between the internalization and externalization of official identity discourses” (Candelario 2007, 33).

Rubirosa’s fame—as exemplified by the international press’s obsessions with his every move—was most evident through his continual presence in American magazines. His fame, one could argue, was played out most manifestly in the United States, the very place in which his hybrid race, as Hughes pointed out, was most socially problematic. Thus, for Rubirosa’s many fans, for these expert readers of his face and impeccably-tailored elegance, how might his mixed-race heritage have been mitigated or expanded by the history and materiality of his Dominican-ness, an identity inscribed by colonialism, slavery, and the detritus of empire in the mid-twentieth century and beyond?

## Mobility

In a reverse conquistador mode, Rubi’s exploits, based on legendary abilities to seduce and conquer rich and famous white women, had made him the stuff of legend and gained him acceptance into the most exclusive social circles, as Hughes would ironically but admiringly note. Stories about Rubirosa’s sexual exploits—his spectacular if brief marriages to the most famous rich women of the day (Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo’s own dark-skinned daughter Flor de Oro, and white heiresses of tobacco and dime store empires, Doris Duke and Barbara Hutton) and to French movie stars (Danielle Darrieux and Odile Rodin); and his notorious affairs with Hollywood’s more racialized sex symbols like Zsa Zsa Gabor, Rita Hayworth, and Ava Gardner—assured him international stature in an ambiguous and ambivalent terrain where race, power, and sexuality joined to produce lasting obsessions among the reading public.

Rubirosa’s life, although played against an international backdrop, was rooted in the tensions between his access to the international stage (he spent some crucial years of his childhood and adolescence in Paris, where his father had held a diplomatic post) and his dependence on the support of the infamous Trujillo

regime (for which he himself worked for decades as a diplomat) to maintain his international status. Entry into the higher echelons of the international social world for a suave but relatively impecunious Dominican (whose local upper-class status did not remotely translate into the wealth required for belonging to the international upper classes) was conditioned on his diplomatic position, which in turn was dependent on Trujillo's continued approval. Such sanction, despite Rubirosa's divorce from the dictator's daughter, grew out of shared notions of light-skinned masculinity, particularly of how Rubirosa's über-maleness (as exemplified through ever-more-admiring reports on the size of his penis and capacity for sexual endurance) matched Trujillo's desires for power and international respect as well as his agenda for national (racial) purity.

From the Dominican perspective, Rubi was the quintessential *tiguere* (the colloquial expression for a *tigre* or alpha-male), and his career trajectory is situated within a particularly complex period of Dominican history: commencing in the wake of the 1937 Haitian massacre and taking off under the shadow of the Cold War and the consolidation of Trujillo's dictatorship, Rubirosa nevertheless managed to invade the international media imaginary, resituating Dominican marginality in the discourse of stardom and modernity. A light-skinned Dominican whose family had deep ties to the diplomatic corps and the military, he channeled his considerable charm into acquiring the wealth through which he could become "[a] tireless presence at chic nightspots and watering holes, a keen race-car driver and polo player, a friend to the rich and infamous, a relentless pursuer of women with huge bank accounts" (Grimes 2005). The path to international playboy status was cleared through Trujillo's conviction that his son-in-law—often described as one of the regime's henchmen—exemplified to the world the potency of the Dominican male identity. In Trujillo's symbolic family, Rubi would play the role of the conquistador, honoring the father, bringing back booty, reversing the claims of coloniality, forever distancing the Dominican Republic from Haiti. As conquistadores used boats and weapons, Rubi would harness twentieth-century technologies in the enterprise of sexual conquest and media control.

## Technology

William Grimes, in his discussion of Rubirosa as the inventor of the playboy image, which he defines as the "sleek, fast-moving animal perfectly adapted to the modern era of jet travel, night clubs, film stars and gossip columns," underscores Rubi's attachment to technologies of mobility and travel. One of the first international jet-setters, Rubirosa seemed always in movement and was photographed most often standing alongside some fast-moving vehicle—from the polo horse, which implied exclusive knowledge about the difficult transport of horses across seas and international borders, to the race car and the airplane, which became emblematic of his superstar status. Perceived as someone who had traveled from the periphery of power (the Dominican Republic) to the very centers of modernity (Paris and New York), Rubirosa's eager embrace of the latest technology, especially cars and jet engines, was patently a fascination with futurity. Rubirosa's iconic relationship with the vehicles of modernity, coupled with his prowess at the wheel, cemented



Porfirio Rubirosa and Zsa Zsa Gabor disembarking at Paris's Orly Airport in 1955.

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his reputation as one of the world's best-known amateur racers and pilots. In these photographic moments, the racial hybridity of his iconicity is surpassed by the figure of the man at the controls of machines that, as Paul Virilio (1994) has argued, are technologies of vision. Rubi's access to the latest technology, as we noted, allowed him symbolic access to futuristic vistas and seemingly erased the racial hybridity that signaled his colonial origins. As a Dominican, this connection made him more remarkably modern than those for whom modernity was a given.

Rubi's clear enjoyment of speed, moreover, translated into an allure that went beyond the modern into a connection to the primitiveness of momentum, danger, and recklessness. For someone like Rubirosa, who was depicted in the press as charmingly untamed and insouciant, the link between technology and speed—between modern control and the pre-modern adrenaline rush of the hunt—placed him, as a colonial mulatto, comfortably in the hybrid space where modernity and the titillation of the erotic meet. As the photo of Zsa Zsa and Rubi rushing off the airplane insinuates, Rubi was racing not to catch up with modernity, but to embody and perhaps overcome it. His death in a car crash, therefore, was generally seen as a fitting end for a playboy who had begun to lose his sexual *élan* (he was fifty-six at the time of his death) and was becoming too accustomed to staying home and working on his garden. Better to go in swift flight at the controls of a Ferrari—a more appropriate end to the life of speed and motion that had been one of his surest paths to “whiteness.” But his fatal accident was also the appropriate punishment for a man who unhinged white male superiority. Not only did he defy white control of technology, but perhaps more importantly, his consumption of females turned the tables on the racial equation, as we presently discuss.

## Sexual (Im)mobility

It was as a lover that the contrast between Rubirosa's purported modern "whiteness" and less easily whitewashed attributes was most blatantly clear. Rubirosa is habitually celebrated for his charm and elegance, which the camera caught lovingly in tender and gentlemanly gestures and the graceful movements that were his trademark. He was, on the one hand, considered by men to be a gentleman to the end. John Gerassi's story of his relationship to Rubirosa is typical of the man's generosity and commitment to friendship, of which there were ample references in the press:

My parents and I had come to the United States in 1940 as political refugees from Franco's fascism and Hitler's nazism, but that was unacceptable to U.S. authorities. So my father, who . . . had been a general in the Spanish Civil War and was hence deemed a "premature anti-fascist" by Washington, used his diplomatic passport to get us past Ellis Island. That document said we were diplomats from the Dominican Republic. It had been given to my father by one of his prewar poker-playing chums, a very high-class Trujillo hitman and diplomatic trouble-shooter (and son-in-law) by the name of Porfirio Rubirosa. In fact, Porfirio had given my father the whole kit and caboodle, that is, the seal, the stamp and so forth, with the understanding that he could use it to save whom he wanted. And my father did just that: he gave some eight thousand Spanish Republican refugees Dominican passports so they could escape the approaching Gestapo. (Baker 1989)

On the other hand, Rubirosa was derided by the press for possessing sexual attributes that separated him from other "white" lovers, racializing him into well-known stereotypical categories of black men's sexual prowess. Interestingly, many of the instances in which he is derided by the media for his erotic appetites are linked to his foreignness, or Dominicanness, as when the *New York Times* referred to him as "the Dominican Republic's answer to Pepé le Pew" (Grimes 2005). The comparison was based on the popular Warner Brothers' *Looney Tunes* character, an amorous skunk who parodied the stereotypical French lover, one who not only spent his days looking for love but also believed every woman was actually in love with him. The French skunk did have, however, two unpleasant traits: the odor to which his last name refers and his inability to understand that "no" means "no." Pepé shares some of Rubirosa's less celebrated attributes—a potential malodorous side (Rubi had a problematic relationship with an unpleasant regime for which he was reputed to be a hitman) and a reputation for physical violence against women (Le Pew was notorious for his blissful inability to acknowledge lack of interest from members of the opposite sex).

In fact, when it comes to outright sexuality, conversations about Rubirosa tend toward the graphic and the bawdy, venturing into the terrain of racial caricature. Truman Capote famously wrote in his unfinished novel *Answered Prayers* that Rubirosa's principal attribute was "an 11-inch *café au lait* sinker as thick as a man's wrist," while his state of permanent erection won him the nickname of "ever ready." Rubirosa's first wife, Flor de Oro Trujillo, is often quoted as complaining that the organ in question was "too big" and describing her post-coital pain. Doris Duke

was fond of remarking that it was “the biggest penis I had seen in my life,” while a former lover describes it as a “long and pointy” pain-causing device. Parisian waiters would refer—and still do—to their large, dark-wood pepper mills as “rubirosas.” References to Rubirosa’s phallus, of which one can find hundreds in the contemporary press, essentialize his body as a sexual instrument of unusual proportions, linking him, in turn, to notions of black sexual potency that were the subject of critical discussion in the contemporary press. Even writers as different as James Baldwin and Frantz Fanon, both living in Paris during the heyday of Rubirosa’s career in that city, addressed the media fascination with Rubirosa’s mythical penis size and sexual performance, a facile adherence to the crass cliché that “Black men have larger genitals, keep their erections longer, and are more easily aroused sexually, are more passionate in their lovemaking, and are better able to satisfy women sexually” (Schmitt 2002, 39).

Similarly, an anecdote about a 1955 treasure hunt in Colombia was used by *Time* magazine to suggest a lechery that is shocking even in “primitive” surroundings and encapsulates Rubirosa’s embodiment of unbridled “colored” sexuality:

Dominican Playboy Porfirio Rubirosa moseyed into Bogotá, Colombia to make preparations for a genuine treasure hunt. Bracing himself for his safari’s plunge into the Choco wilds on Colombia’s Pacific Coast, Rubi, out to make the jungle give up some platinum and gold, first tested his luck at a race track, won a cool 9,600 pesos on a 100-to-1 shot. He also took his ease in Bogotá’s elegantly stuffy Jockey Club, where he complained about the absence of vodka (he thirsted in vain for a Bloody Mary). Colombia’s press hailed his expedition with gleeful gibes. Item: a caricature of Rubirosa whiling away his safari time by pinching a beautiful nude Indian maiden. Asked for his slant on honest labor, the Ding Dong Daddy from Santo Domingo yawned languidly: “It’s impossible for me to work. I just don’t have time.” (“People,” 1955)

Rubi’s sexuality, both hyper-racialized and Disneyfied by the press, suggested a return to the troubling mixture of primitive charisma and physical brutality characteristic of the Latin American *caudillo*.

## Sexual Piracy

When it came to self-invention, Rubirosa would meet his match in Hungarian starlet Zsa Zsa Gabor, in the 1950s an aspiring actress and relentless self-promoter who was also fetishized for her slightly silly, kittenish sexual persona. The media, which diligently catalogued Rubi’s affairs, feasted on the photogenic and tempestuous couple’s torrid trans-continental, trans-racial affair, which had more of bathos than pathos in it. The relationship between Rubirosa and Gabor is interesting in our context because of the ways in which her own urge toward legitimacy as a European subject was often built on relegating him to the margins of his original (colored) marginality by constantly underscoring her own blondness against his Latinity. Gabor, who as a Hungarian had limited claim to a dominant European identity defined by Western Europe, often sought such legitimacy by playing against Rubirosa’s more questionable claims as a “Latin gigolo” (it was Gabor, for example, who

kept making allusions to the press about his marrying women for their money). In Zsa Zsa's self-promoting script, he had been relegated to the role of non-European Latin lover subserviently devoted to her. In photo after photo she monopolizes the lens, and he is demoted from his usual glamorous protagonism to being the bearer of her abundant travel paraphernalia.

Gabor, like Rubi, constantly shuffled a variety of personas. Whereas he was the perfect gentleman, the avid sportsman, the suave lover, and the embodiment of sexual potency, she played the reckless adventuress, the glamour girl, and the woman-with-a-past (Allen 1988). She epitomized the "triumph of shamelessness over hypocrisy, of the feminine ethic of doing what you can with what you've got, a sort of avatar of that Vaseline-lensed heaven you see on the covers of a billion paperback books" (Allen 1988). When these personas clashed—which often happened as they wove in and out of their relationships between marriages (nine for her, five for him), we get glimpses of the ways in which their relationship racialized him, as she constantly reminded the public that as a "Latin" lover, he was unable to hold on to her blonde European self.

We can see this underscoring of his racialized identity in the infamous episode of Rubirosa's announcement of his plans to marry Woolworth heiress Barbara Hutton. Angry at the news, Gabor throws a lamp at Rubirosa—or so she tells a pack of reporters she called to a press conference the day after his wedding—who slaps her face. Wearing an eye-patch to cover her purported black eye—a mock pirate about to hijack his new marriage—Zsa Zsa announces that he only married Hutton for her money (reducing him to gigolo status), that he "beat" her (hence the piratical eye patch), and that he settled for Hutton because Zsa Zsa turned him down (the ultimate and now rejected lover has met his match). Such was the power of the affair in the public eye that the next day all the mannequins in the windows on Rodeo Drive and 5th Avenue were decorated with eye patches. Zsa Zsa's transformation of the somewhat queerish, dandy-esque Rubi into the dark, Latin, and rejected brute, victimizer of blonde beauties, represents a transformation of the Rubirosa persona, a forced return to an abandoned Dominicanness and to the Rubirosa-as-Trujillo-henchman avatar that he had worked so hard to leave behind. In this particular episode, the blonde Zsa Zsa claimed the last laugh. Or did she?

### The Persistence of Memory and Iconicity

In 2009, asked about his most memorable encounter during a fifty-year career as a musician, world-famous Dominican salsa bandleader Johnny Pacheco replied that it had been, unquestionably, his meeting fellow Dominican playboy Porfirio Rubirosa at the old Palladium Club in New York in the mid-1950s. Realizing that Rubirosa was in the audience as he was going up on the stage, Pacheco could only gasp: "ese tipo es un barbarazo"—a truly Dominican phrase that can be translated perhaps as "that is quite a guy" or "he is a man's man," which conveys a certain type of über-maleness greatly admired on the island. Pacheco's comments add one more grain of stardust to the myth of Rubirosa, reminding us of a figure that could only have materialized out of the excesses of the "era de Trujillo." Describing his memorable encounter, Pacheco recalls that Rubirosa was "impeccably dressed," without

a single flaw in his appearance: “he was exquisitely groomed, from his nails to his hair, and he was accompanied by two well-known personalities, Kim Novak and Doris Duke.” Most significantly, Rubirosa, Pacheco comments, was “very elegant and looked like a real man”—he was “impressive and loved” despite the fact that he “beat and later abandoned Trujillo’s daughter” (Flor de Oro, his first wife). Asked if Rubirosa was his idol, Pacheco replied, “Anyone would like to be Rubirosa” (Cruz Tejada 2009).

Pacheco’s adulation stands for the countless admirers of this Dominican legend of masculine *savoir-faire*, who see his carefully manicured hands and elegantly clad body as erasing those very marks of race that the foreign press—particularly the American press—hinted at so subtly, and which Langston Hughes calls by its name after Rubirosa’s death. As we can see from the discussion above, Rubirosa skirted the defining lines of race—and as his public we have no notion of whether his hybrid racial identity was an issue he ever faced himself. As an icon of Latin masculinity, however, this upper-class-born son of a Dominican general continues to be the subject of numerous books, articles, and countless websites that obsessively explore his career as seducer, polo player, race-car driver, and diplomat for the controversial Trujillo government. None, so far, seem devoted to his race. The continued attention is evidence that Rubirosa still holds enough symbolic capital to keep legions of fans nostalgically returning to the debonair images they remember from *Life* magazine, now archived in labyrinthine websites, virtual memorials that easily compete with those dedicated to Selena or Che Guevara. Porfirio Rubirosa stood for the modernity wished for by Rafael Trujillo’s regime, and he skillfully negotiated the tensions between his self-constructed image as a gigolo and the burden of pre-modernity that the Trujillo regime’s actions often imposed on him. For Trujillo, Rubirosa’s value was in his iconicity, which when read from his regime, necessitated that Rubirosa be seen by the world as white. From the perspective of Trujillo, who continued to be loyal to Rubirosa even after his daughter divorced him, the latter’s value could be summarized in elements that had nothing to do with race: Rubirosa was “an excellent diplomat because women adored him and he could lie with the best of them” (Cruz Tejada 2009).

## Notes

1. Needless to say, he was primarily the Dominican Macho’s macho, but here we will be focusing on the image of him as interpreted primarily by the international press.
2. While cultural critic Silvio Torres-Saillant has argued that ninety percent of the Dominican population is black and mulatto (2000, 126; Candelario 2007, 23), Trujillista ideology had institutionalized anti-Haitianism, Negrophobia, and Hispanophilia (Candelario 2007, 21).