

## RECENT WORKS ON AFRO-HISPANIC LITERATURE

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*THE AFRO-SPANISH AMERICAN AUTHOR: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF CRITICISM.* By RICHARD L. JACKSON. (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1980. Pp. 129. \$20.00.)

*BLACK WRITERS IN LATIN AMERICA.* By RICHARD L. JACKSON. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979. Pp. 224. \$12.50.)

*AFRO-HISPANIC POETRY, 1940–1980: FROM SLAVERY TO “NEGRITUD” IN SOUTH AMERICAN VERSE.* By MARVIN A. LEWIS. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983. Pp. 190. \$22.50.)

*VOICES FROM UNDER: BLACK NARRATIVE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN.* Edited by WILLIAM LUIS. (Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 1984. Pp. 263. \$29.95.)

Although there have been black writers in Latin America for more than a century, the systematic study of Afro-Hispanic literature is a recent phenomenon that emerged with the creation of Black Studies programs during the late 1960s. Because of the historical moment when the discipline began and the social position of blacks in their respective societies, critics tend to evaluate the writing primarily for its ideological content and to pay more attention to what the themes of the literary works “should be” rather than to what they are. Moreover, critics of Afro-American literature often employ a mimetic theory of writing that posits continuity between the social world and the literary text. At the same time, many critical studies assume a defensive tone because they are predicated on the intent to prove that black aesthetic standards are as valid as the prevailing Euro-American norms.

The main topic of debate among scholars in the field is whether an authentic black literature expresses racial consciousness through its content or its form. On the one hand, in a 1977 essay, Antonio Olliz Boyd argued that “while most critics of Latin American literature refuse to acknowledge non-whiteness as an aesthetic concept,” the presentation of themes reflecting an author’s pride in his black identity is more important than technique.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Martha Cobb agrees that Afro-American literature contains thematic constants, such as the

portrayal of characters in conflict with the values of the dominant society. But she also thinks that there is a distinctively black style of writing whose primary characteristic is its oral-aural focus. In this respect, the poetry of Nicolás Guillén is representative, because it uses the structure of the *son*, simulated drum beats, onomatopoeia, and other devices to represent the sound of the black voice on the printed page.<sup>2</sup>

In establishing the parameters of Afro-Hispanic literature, both Boyd and Cobb assume that an authentic black literature originates from within the black community. But Pedro Barreda, in his analysis of the black protagonist in Cuban fiction, indicates that art should not be equated with experience because nonblack authors, like Antonio Zambrana and José Antonio Ramos, were able to bridge the gap between subject and object by creating credible black characters.<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, Leslie Wilson points out that the stylistic devices used by Guillén are not racially specific because nonblack writers, such as Emilio Ballagas and Luis Palés Matos, also used them to portray the black experience with sensitivity.<sup>4</sup>

The question of whether blacks can be the only true interpreters of their collective experience depends on whether one approaches Afro-Hispanic literature from a North American or a Latin American perspective. Critics who adopt the much-discussed North American posture of racial polarization tend to regard Afro-Hispanic literature as culturally autonomous, with its own style and themes deriving from the black American's history of oppression. According to this view, only Afro-Americans have the necessary insight and mastery of the appropriate techniques to depict their situation accurately. Advocates of the Latin American ideal of racial blending believe that black and nonblack writers share the same cultural context and that therefore, given comparable talent, both are equally equipped to overcome their ethnocentrism.

The issue becomes compounded when an author's ideological stance or the goals of the larger society affect his or her treatment of the black experience. In such instances, the writer's representation of certain kinds of speech and patterns of behavior may be interpreted by one scholar as a marker of ethnicity and by another as an index of social class. For example, because of Nicolás Guillén's eventual adoption of Marxist philosophy, Keith Ellis interprets the poet's pre-Marxist portrayals of alienated blacks not simply as a sign of racial oppression in Cuba but as a denunciation of class conflict in a dependent capitalist society.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, from her vantage point in socialist Cuba, Nancy Morejón subsumes the racial issue to the national search for an independent identity. In Morejón's opinion, Guillén does not highlight blacks for their ethnic specificity. Instead, she claims, even in his early pre-revolutionary work, he uses the black presence to reveal the social

stratification that existed in the neocolonial, pre-Castro republic and to remind readers of the historical contributions of the working class to shaping Cuban society and culture.<sup>6</sup>

The books under review continue this debate on literary blackness. Each begins with a definition of Afro-Hispanic writing, although they all approach the problem differently. William Luis structures his anthology on the principle that both black and nonblack authors are valid interpreters of the black experience, while Richard Jackson and Marvin Lewis privilege the black writer, whose insider's view they consider essential for an accurate portrayal of the black situation. Yet each of the books is unique. Jackson's *The Afro-Spanish American Author* is the first annotated bibliography of Afro-Hispanic literature, a fitting sequel to his *Black Writers in Latin America*, which is a chronological survey of the major writers and trends in Afro-Hispanic literature and the only general introduction to the field. Marvin Lewis's *Afro-Hispanic Poetry, 1940–1980: From Slavery to "Negritud" in South American Verse* is the first comprehensive study of nine poets from contemporary Uruguay, Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia. William Luis's *Voices from Under: Black Narrative in Latin America and the Caribbean* is the first collection of critical essays on blacks from the four major linguistic areas in Latin America: Brazil, the French- and English-speaking Caribbean, and Spanish America.

*Voices from Under* contains articles by twelve different critics, framed by a preliminary chapter and a short bibliographic essay written by the editor. Luis's first chapter sets the tone for the entire collection as it traces the emergence of black literature from the discovery and conquest of America to the present. He notes that earlier literature, such as Alonso de Ercilla's *La araucana* (1569–1590), contained only passing reference to blacks. During the nineteenth century, however, the rise of the abolitionist movement led to a significant increase in the publication of works on black themes, which continued in the twentieth century with the Negritude and other literary movements. Luis then discusses the impact of political events, such as the drive for independence in the West Indies and the American civil rights movement, on cultural developments in the black community. But his discussion does not clarify the relationship between history and literature because references to the activity of writers appear incidental to the chronicling of sociopolitical events in Latin America. That is to say, history overshadows fiction. When works of fiction are mentioned, it is only because Luis believes that they reflect the unchanged situation of blacks since slavery. Thus, ironically, although the catalogue of external events seems to indicate that black lives are embedded in history, Luis's conclusion is that blacks exist in a realm of timelessness.

But the work of some of the authors cited disproves Luis's conclusion. V. S. Reid's *New Day* (1949) does not depict a timeless world

because it ends with the narrator and other characters concerned with the constitutional changes that will transfer political authority from British to Jamaican hands. Moreover, Reid's use of dialect embodies a break with the past because for the first time in West Indian fiction, the language of narration places the uneducated majority at the center of Caribbean political life. Had any of the contributors to *Voices from Under* chosen to study the work of George Lamming or Manuel Zapata Olivella, editor Luis would have discovered the historical consciousness that he finds missing from the lives of Afro-American characters. Moreover, Luis's reliance on Carpentier's cyclical concept of time to validate his claim that "the lives of Blacks in Latin America and the Caribbean seem to defy the chronology of historical time" (p. 22) is a questionable proposition because of the well-known tendency of historical fiction to introduce anachronisms, personality changes in historically based characters, and other distortions of "fact" to achieve its novelistic purposes.

In keeping with Luis's perception of black literature, all the essays in *Voices from Under* refer to the historical situation of blacks. But few achieve the desired synthesis between historical background and literary criticism. In many instances, the focus is diffuse because the historical information is not well integrated into the critical discourse. Lisa Davis's chapter on Quince Duncan, Carol Beane's article on South American fiction, and Lemuel Johnson's study of Henrique Coelho Netto all exemplify this tendency. Other essays, like Roberto González Echevarría's analysis of the role of black history in Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces* and Richard Jackson's article on the treatment of slavery and racism by Juan Francisco Manzano and Martín Morúa Delgado, appear schematic because of their sketchy definition of the works' relationship to their cultural context. Selwyn Cudjoe's chapter on the problem of identity in V. S. Naipaul's work suffers to an even greater extent from misplaced emphasis on the cultural element because Cudjoe seems less interested in critically interpreting Naipaul's books than in describing the Caribbean sociocultural scene that he expects all West Indian authors to depict. Claiming that the novel, unlike calypso and reggae music, is an alien genre because of its non-West Indian origin, Cudjoe proceeds to dismiss Naipaul's work as an irrelevant colonialist project yet paradoxically praises Wilson Harris's efforts in this genre. Other chapters pay far too much attention to narrative plots and themes and not enough to the style and techniques that sustain these plots and themes. Juris Sileniek's essay on maroons in Francophone literature is a less flagrant example of this tendency than Ronald Rassner's essay on the freed slave in Brazilian literature or Julia Cuervo Hewitt's chapter on Nigerian folklore and Cuban literature. The latter simply summarizes the plots of many Yoruba folktales, with no critical evaluation of the literary adaptations from folklore.

As literary criticism, Joseph Ferdinand's essay on Haitian political fiction and Jonathan Tittler's article on *Juyungo* are the most outstanding contributions to *Voices from Under*. What is remarkable about Ferdinand's achievement is that he resists the temptation to discuss only the referential aspect of the prose, to which the novels selected seem to lend themselves so readily. Instead, the Haitian critic includes a detailed analysis of the rhetorical strategies used by the authors to create their fictional universe. Similarly, Jonathan Tittler shifts attention from the purely thematic features of Adalberto Ortiz's *Juyungo* to its textuality by showing how its different stylistic conventions affect the formulation and meaning of its ideas. Thus, unlike most of the other contributors who tend to treat the novelist as a mere recorder of "facts," Tittler and Ferdinand examine the creative process by which the writer converts the data of material experience into the language of a readable text. By studying the novelists' use of metaphors, symbols, point of view, and other narrative conventions and evaluating the aesthetic qualities of the books' presentation of characters and events, Ferdinand and Tittler focus much-needed attention on black writing as writing.

In doing so, they fulfill one of the stated aims of Luis's book, namely, "to rescue black narrative in Latin America and the Caribbean from the fringe and bring it to the foreground of Western literature" (p. 3). But because most of the essays in the volume are concerned with the extraliterary aspects of fiction, this anthology falls far short of its stated goal. This failure is due primarily to the editor's belief that black literature mirrors black history and that "the enslavement, oppression and marginality of Blacks in Africa and in the New World are what brings their history and literature together" (p. 3). If black literature indeed reflects black history, and that history is a well-known tale of oppression, it is unlikely that readers familiar with the structural innovations of Carlos Fuentes and Julio Cortázar will be convinced that another collection of essays on slavery, colonialism, and racism attests to the centrality of black narrative. In fact, *Voices from Under* reinforces the notion that black fiction merely reproduces the collective past and therefore has only documentary value. Interestingly enough, this anthology contains no essays on the experimental fiction of Nelson Estupiñán Bass or the work of Juan Pablo Sojo.

Several chapters also cause one to question the appropriateness of the anthology's subtitle, *Black Narrative in Latin America and the Caribbean*. For example, Ronald Rassner devotes twice as much space to drama as he does to fiction; and in the Anglo-Caribbean section, genre classification is evidently irrelevant because the essays of O. R. Dathorne and Selwyn Cudjoe pay as much attention to poetry, folk songs, and reggae and calypso lyrics as they do to the fiction of Naipaul and Wilson Harris. In fact, some of the most lucid insights into Afro-Carib-

bean literature appear in Dathorne's comments on Derek Walcott's poetry. The inclusion of an essay on V. S. Naipaul also makes it evident that for Luis, the term *black* is synonymous with *oppressed*—an idea already embedded in the book's title. Not only is Naipaul primarily concerned with East Indians in Trinidad, but as previously noted, Cudjoe's analysis discusses what Naipaul's work fails to say about contemporary Caribbean aspirations, with little indication of its validity as narrative.

As far as the critical depth of its essays is concerned, *Voices from Under* does not supersede earlier single-author comparative studies.<sup>7</sup> It is broader in scope than collections like Oscar Fernández de la Vega and Alberto Pamiés's *Iniciación a la poesía afro-americana* and Miriam DeCosta's *Blacks in Hispanic Literature*.<sup>8</sup> The most valid contribution that *Voices from Under* makes to scholarship is to bring to the attention of the English-speaking public the names of lesser-known writers, such as Quince Duncan and Martín Morúa Delgado. In this respect, it complements Edward Mullen's recent edition of *The Life and Poems of a Cuban Slave: Juan Francisco Manzano*, which also links Hispanic writing to the larger Afro-American literary tradition.<sup>9</sup>

The work of Richard Jackson serves a similar historical purpose. His books are important landmarks in the field because they were the first to extend the study of blacks in Spanish American literature beyond the boundaries of the Caribbean. The book under review here, *Black Writers in Latin America*, continues the task of Jackson's previous project, *The Black Image in Latin American Literature* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976). But whereas the latter examined ethnic themes in the writing of black and nonblack authors, the new study looks at Afro-Hispanic writers exclusively. Consequently, there is a shift in emphasis. While the earlier study sought evidence of "racist attitudes toward black people in Latin America" (p. ix), the later work examines the representation of black consciousness in Spanish American literature from the early nineteenth century to the present.

To do so, Jackson applies the critical concepts of Martha Cobb, Stephen Henderson, and other theorists of black aesthetics in the United States. Like Cobb, Jackson believes that "personal identification with blackness and personal experience with the black experience have a great deal to do with a black writer's choice of words, symbols, and images" (p. 4). But Jackson is less interested than Cobb in analyzing the rhetorical aspect of black writing, preferring to concentrate on a discussion of themes and the role of the larger society in determining the writer's expression of those themes. Occasionally, he comments on stylistic devices that seem to shed light on the writer's situation. For instance, he points out that the recurring images of whiteness in the poetry of Gaspar Octavio Hernández represent not only the standard poetic symbols of innocence but also the escapist tendencies of the

Modernist poet who sought to flee from his blackness. Consequently, the color white signifies frustrated desire and the unattainable for this black poet.

At times Jackson's comments reveal the problems inherent in using ethnicity as a basis for critical judgment because sometimes the textual evidence subverts the intent to find common tendencies among all writers of a particular racial group. For example, in his chapter on Nicolás Guillén, Jackson attempts to dissociate the Cuban poet from the Negrista movement, claiming that "rather than associate Guillén with poetic Negrism, we should see his dramatic conversion to blackness in the late twenties and early thirties as a reaction against this white literary fad that was sweeping the world" (pp. 82–83). Admittedly, several of Guillén's early poems show an awareness of social ills like poverty, unemployment, and racial discrimination that is absent from the work of many of his peers. But it is difficult to argue that Guillén's portraits of hip-swaying, hard-drinking, pleasure-seeking blacks in such poems as "Canto negro," "Rumba," and "Secuestro de la mujer de Antonio" are more authentic and less superficial than those in José Zacarías Tallet's "La rumba," Luis Palés Matos's "Danza negra," or Emilio Ballagas's "Elegía de María Belén Chacón."

The effort to distance Guillén from his Hispanic colleagues stems from Jackson's attempt to find similar racial attitudes in Latin America and the United States. Thus he argues in his conclusion that the ultimate sign of black liberation in Latin America would be the repudiation of *mestizaje* and the production of a more militantly black literature than that written to date. Yet, as he himself recognizes, such a development is unlikely because the degree of racial awareness in Latin America is less intense than in the United States. As Jackson notes in his introduction, most Afro-Hispanic writers espouse integration rather than separatism.

Jackson is at his best when discussing the relationship between literature and ideology, as in the chapter on Manuel Zapata Olivella where he examines the difference between the Havana and Medellín editions of *Corral de negros* as well as the sociopolitical factors determining textual changes in style, narrative and character development. The last two chapters on Quince Duncan and Carlos Guillermo Wilson are also valuable because they highlight recent developments in Afro-Hispanic writing. The analysis of Wilson's poetry enables the reader to appreciate the Panamanian's innovative techniques as Jackson cites several poems whose typographical concordance of words and meaning is reminiscent of Brazilian concrete poetry. Given the relative unavailability of Wilson's books in comparison with the texts of more established writers, Jackson's chapter introduces the Panamanian's works to a wider audience.

*The Afro-Spanish American Author* also enables scholars to stay abreast of developments in the field. Its 562 items make it the most comprehensive bibliography on the subject to date. Most entries cover materials in English and Spanish, with a few listings in French. The entries are arranged in three groups: general bibliographies of Afro-Hispanic literature and culture; general literary criticism—books, articles, dissertations—and anthologies of creative works; and the original works of twenty-five writers accompanied by critical studies of each. The volume also contains chronological and geographical listings of authors, an appendix of periodicals cited, and an alphabetical index of critics.

As its title indicates, this bibliography refers exclusively to black writers. Jackson's short introduction situates them in Spanish American literary history and discusses recent trends in Afro-Hispanic criticism. Here, too, Jackson states his goal of giving greater visibility to the work of black writers, thereby indicating that this book complements his *Black Writers*. The annotations are rarely evaluative, except in the case of multiple editions of the same work, and tend instead to describe the contents of both primary and secondary sources, although Jackson does not consistently annotate the creative material. For most of these books, he provides only the title and the place and date of publication. But the bibliography remains a useful research tool for scholars seeking information on what has been written by and about the major black writers in Spanish America. Cross-references for items dealing with more than one author give the user immediate access to all relevant sources of information.

Marvin Lewis's *Afro-Hispanic Poetry* adds a new dimension to the field by examining a less familiar group of South American writers. Previous books on Afro-Hispanic poetry have either dealt with a single author or discussed Caribbean writing.<sup>10</sup> Lewis's goal is "to define and to demonstrate through specific examples and analyses precisely what Afro-Hispanic poetry is" (p. 1). He begins by repudiating the conventional labels applied to the works he examines. For instance, he rejects Rosa E. Valdés-Cruz's use of the term *poesía negroide* in her book *La poesía negroide en América* (New York: Las Américas Publishing, 1970) because of its pejorative connotations.

To reach his own definition of Afro-Hispanic poetry, Lewis elaborates on one that appeared in an anthology edited by José Luis González and Mónica Mansour,<sup>11</sup> observing that Afro-Hispanic poetry is "a poetry by, about, and written to but not just for people of African descent in the Spanish-speaking world" (p. 3). In his effort to reveal the nature of Afro-Hispanic poetry, Lewis analyzes one or two significant works by Virginia Brindis de Salas, Pilar Barrios, Nicomedes Santa Cruz, Nelson Estupiñán Bass, Adalberto Ortiz, Antonio Preciado, Jorge



Artel, Hugo Salazar Valdés, and Juan Zapata Olivella. Lewis argues that these writers all share a sense of negritude that is expressed by the symbols of African survival throughout their work. According to this critic, the rhetorical references to African religious practices, music, musical instruments, and dances represent an attempt to create a positive cultural heritage for blacks in the New World.

But beyond the initial requirement that this literature be written by blacks, it is not clear from Lewis's analysis what the distinguishing features of Afro-Hispanic poetry are. Although the writers selected meet Lewis's criterion that "a significant portion of their literary production interpret(s) the experiences of blacks in the Americas based upon firsthand experiences and knowledge" (p. 3), the same can be said of several nonblack poets like Manuel del Cabral and Emilio Ballagas. Moreover, on the basis of Lewis's definition, some black poets like Gaspar Octavio Hernández and Nancy Morejón would be excluded from the literary canon because their writing does not focus primarily on the collective experience of blacks in the New World.

Lewis admits that the authors he studies do not write exclusively on black themes. Not only do they write about love, war, death, and other traditional poetic topics, but they evolve in their poetic development from an overwhelming concern with ethnic identity to an awareness of the brotherhood of man across racial, social, and national lines. While they deplore the adverse situation of blacks in their own countries, they also realize that suffering is not confined to blacks. Hence the many appeals for an end to injustice throughout the world.

By switching from portraying blacks as racially different from other people to depicting the social similarity of all human beings, these poets indicate that they share the humanistic outlook of other major Latin American writers such as César Vallejo and Pablo Neruda. Thus instead of revealing the specificity of Afro-Hispanic poetry, Lewis's *Afro-Hispanic Poetry* unwittingly demonstrates its continuity with the Latin American literary tradition of social commitment. Lewis's comments on imagery and poetic structure also indicate that the poetic expression of the nine authors is essentially Hispanic. All use the traditional meters and verse forms of Hispanic poetry, like the *décima* and the *romance*. While Adalberto Ortiz and Nicomedes Santa Cruz occasionally depart from the diction of standard Spanish, this convention serves to link their work with nonblack forms of popular poetry, such as gaucho verse.

Like the works by Richard Jackson and William Luis, Marvin Lewis's *Afro-Hispanic Poetry* introduces the English-speaking reader to a number of less-publicized writers. This increased critical attention to Afro-Hispanic literature points to a resurgence of interest in the field. But it is evident from the pioneering nature of the books reviewed here

that there is still a need to formulate appropriate critical guidelines for evaluating the texts of Afro-Hispanic literature.

NOTES

1. Antonio Olliz Boyd, "The Concept of Black Awareness as a Thematic Approach in Latin American Literature," in *Blacks in Hispanic Literature: Critical Essays*, edited by Miriam DeCosta (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977), 65–73.
2. Martha Cobb, *Harlem, Haiti, and Havana: A Comparative Critical Study of Langston Hughes, Jacques Roumain, Nicolás Guillén* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1979).
3. Pedro Barreda, *The Black Protagonist in the Cuban Novel*, translated by Page Bancroft (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979).
4. Leslie N. Wilson, *La poesía afroantillana* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1979).
5. Keith Ellis, *Cuba's Nicolás Guillén: Poetry and Ideology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 59–96.
6. Nancy Morejón, *Nación y mestizaje en Nicolás Guillén* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1982), 153–222.
7. For example, G. R. Coulthard's *Race and Colour in Caribbean Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); and Lemuel A. Johnson's *The Devil, the Gargoyle, and the Buffoon: The Negro as Metaphor in Western Literature* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971).
8. Oscar Fernández de la Vega and Alberto N. Pamies, *Iniciación a la poesía afro-americana* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1973); and Miriam De Costa, *Blacks in Hispanic Literature*.
9. Edward J. Mullen, *The Life and Poems of a Cuban Slave: Juan Francisco Manzano, 1797–1854* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1981).
10. An example of a monographic work is Teresa C. Salas and Henry J. Richards's *Asedios a la poesía de Nicomedes Santa Cruz* (Quito: Editora Andina, 1982). On Caribbean writing, see Mónica Mansour's *La poesía negrista* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1973); and Wilfred Cartey's *Black Images* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1970).
11. I refer to *Poesía negra de América: Antología*, edited by José Luis González and Mónica Mansour (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1976).