

AFRO-HISPANIC AND CARIBBEAN  
LITERATURES IN RECENT THEORY  
AND CRITICISM:

Affirmations and Implications

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*THE EMPIRE WRITES BACK: THEORY AND PRACTICE IN POST-COLONIAL LITERATURES.* By Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. (London: Routledge, 1989. Pp. 246. \$39.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)

*FIFTY CARIBBEAN WRITERS: A BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHICAL CRITICAL SOURCE-BOOK.* Edited by Daryl Cumber Dance. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1986. Pp. 530. \$65.00 cloth.)

*NICOLAS GUILLEN: POPULAR POET OF THE CARIBBEAN.* By Ian Isidore Smart. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992. Pp. 187. \$27.50 cloth.)

*ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRO-VENEZUELAN LITERATURE.* By Marvin A. Lewis. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992. Pp. 120. \$24.95 cloth.)

*CULTURA AFROCUBANA 3: LAS RELIGIONES Y LAS LENGUAS.* By Jorge Castellanos and Isabel Castellanos. (Miami, Fla.: Ediciones Universal, 1992. Pp. 456. \$39.00 paper.)

During the late 1960s, many black graduate students in the United States felt the irresistible need to make their education "relevant" to their particular ethnic background, that is, to their situation and identity as African-Americans. For this reviewer, who was pursuing an advanced degree in Hispanic Studies, that need manifested itself in different ways. On one level, it involved reconciling the enjoyable and rewarding study of a "foreign culture" with the imperative of affirming the existence and importance of black cultures in the Americas. This development in turn sparked an interest in exploring nexus and parallels between Afro-American literature in the United States and Hispanic (Spanish and Latin American) literatures and also led to injecting everyday "real-world" issues like racism and colonialism into discussions in the inner sanctums of the ivory tower.

Although a few canonical works such as *El Lazarillo de Tormes* and *Martín Fierro* exhibit an occasional, fleeting black presence, course syllabi,

class discussions, and graduate reading lists made little reference to Afro-Hispanic elements beyond certain recognized and indispensable representatives of *negrismo* or Afro-Antillean and Afro-Cuban poetry, such as Luis Palés Matos, Nicolás Guillén, Emilio Ballagas, and Alejo Carpentier. Consequently, in-depth examination of the black or African presence in Latin American and Spanish literatures was rare. Given the backdrop of those uncertain yet exciting times of social ferment, racial angst, and an outpouring of black literature, it seemed strange and illogical that little academic attention was being devoted to literary and cultural writings of Latin American authors of African descent. Then as now, however, older scholars were more attuned to established names and literary works whose artistic merit and timeless value had already been validated by an ample critical bibliography. Although professors as individuals may have been open-minded, the frequent selection of seemingly “irrelevant” texts, an unquestioning focus on values assumed to be “universal,” and the emphasis on a narrow yet supposedly “objective” aesthetic approach to literature exacerbated the already rarefied atmosphere of graduate school. Given the political, economic, and cultural realities of dominance in Latin America, it is not surprising that the vast majority of recognized writers were mestizo or white.

Younger faculty, perhaps cognizant of the importance of building their scholarly reputations on respected writers whose works were well publicized and studied, may have been loath to explore uncharted and less secure areas of study. Some who demonstrated interest in examining the works of noncanonical or relatively unknown authors were encouraged to turn their attention to the tried and true—in effect, to white writers. Nor was it unheard of back then for scholars outside the mainstream and those embarked on an interdisciplinary approach to literature to be accused of engaging in sociology rather than literary criticism. As a result, novels like Enrique López Albújar’s *Matalaché*, Adalberto Ortiz’s *Juyungo*, Juan Pablo Sojo’s *Nochebuena negra*, and Manuel Zapata Olivella’s *Detrás del rostro* and *En Chimá nace un santo* rarely received scholarly attention and usually had to be discovered outside the classroom. Moreover, it seemed that would-be critics were expected to engage and understand the texts by applying a method of close reading that offered little or no reference to the historical, social, and political contexts in which they were written. Criticism itself, concentrating almost exclusively on well-known canonical works by European and Euro-American writers, reflected and reinforced the hegemonic structure of literary study, rendering the notion of culture “as somehow divorced from, because transcending, the everyday world,” as Edward Said has pointed out.<sup>1</sup>

Since those years, many changes have occurred. Challenged by

1. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1994), xiii.

changing perceptions and discourses from within and without, the traditional Hispanic literary canon has opened somewhat wider to voices and perspectives that were previously excluded or disdained. More non-European and women writers have been introduced into classrooms, and their works are increasingly the subject of scholarly inquiry. Several new interdisciplinary journals devoted to Afro-Hispanic literature and related topics have appeared since the early 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Equally important, new theoretical discourses on literature have emerged that take other disciplines into account, examine ideas, events, and concerns found in literary texts previously considered irrelevant or unimportant, and focus on marginalized and non-European cultures, writers, and works. The five books considered here attest to some of these transformations and trends, especially as they relate to Afro-Hispanic and Caribbean literatures.

*The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin is a generally readable introduction to a diverse array of literary theories and writings emanating from or related to lands colonized by European powers, an approach that has gained much currency of late. As employed by these authors, the term *postcolonial* encompasses “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (p. 2). They also use it as “the term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which this is constituted.” Thus this book is concerned with “the world as it exists during and after the period of European imperial domination and the effects of this on contemporary cultures” (p. 2).

Although *The Empire Writes Back* focuses on literature of the English-speaking world, many of the concepts and issues presented here—decolonization, marginalization, authenticity, essentialism, identity, and hybridity—are pertinent if not directly applicable to the literatures of Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking America in general and Afro-Hispanic literature in particular.<sup>3</sup> For example, the first chapter discusses four

2. The most notable of these journals, the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, was founded in Washington, D.C., in 1982 under the editorship of Stanley Cyrus and Ian Smart, two professors at Howard University. Since 1986 the journal has been edited at the University of Missouri-Columbia by Marvin Lewis and Edward Mullen. *América Negra (Expedición Humana a la Zaga de la América Oculta)* made its first semi-annual appearance in June 1991, published by the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá and edited by anthropologists Nina de Friedemann, Jaime Arocha Rodríguez, and Jaime Bernal Villegas. The latest periodical concerned with peoples of African descent in Latin America is the *Journal of Afro-Latin American Studies and Literature*, whose inaugural issue came out in 1993 in Washington, D.C.

3. It is noteworthy, for example, that Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, relying on Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America* to illustrate the power and function of writing in the colonial situation, attribute Hernán Cortez's defeat of the Aztecs to his seizure and domination of the means of communication and production of discourse and symbols, made possible largely by use of an interpreter and the authority imposed by a system of writing. See *The Empire Writes Back*, 79–81.

descriptive models of postcolonial writing, one of them a national or regional model, as exemplified by the United States and the West Indies respectively, and another model, that of “Black writing,” which identifies black culture and identity as characteristics that cut across various literatures arising out of the African diaspora. Using the national or regional model, one could easily substitute almost any country in Latin America or any of its various regions (such as the Andean, Caribbean, or Río de la Plata), or even the continent as a whole.<sup>4</sup> With regard to the model of “Black writing,” one might need only mention the work of critics like Richard Jackson and Marvin Lewis, who have linked Afro-Hispanic writers and writing to the broad concept of *Négritude*.<sup>5</sup>

Occasionally, general statements made in *The Empire Writes Back* resonate beyond Anglophone America, such as this observation: “From the early days of slavery, cultural clash and miscegenation formed the brutal texture of Caribbean life” (p. 146). Yet for those interested in the Hispanic Caribbean and other areas of Latin America, this book almost begs for comparisons to be made. It is regrettable, although understandable, that the contents draw virtually no analogies or contrasts between Anglophone postcolonial literatures in the Americas and their Spanish-speaking counterparts. One can also argue that despite their linguistic, cultural, and human diversity, the individual and collective entities of the region known variously as the West Indies, the Antilles, and the Caribbean share a history of European colonization, decimation of native peoples, African slavery, and racial mixing—all of which may have endowed them with more commonalities than differences. For example, the belief held by certain Caribbean writers that “racially mixed populations of the Caribbean . . . offer unique possibilities for cross-cultural creativity and philosophy *unavailable* to monocultural societies, or to those which aspire to monoculturalism” (p. 151, emphasis in original) is also evident in writings of Afro-Colombian novelist Manuel Zapata Olivella, himself a native of the Colombian Atlantic Coast on the Caribbean.<sup>6</sup>

For readers interested in Latin American literature, the value of *The Empire Writes Back* lies in its assemblage of a wide array of critical and creative sources that have shaped and given expression to the theory and practice of postcolonial literature. This rather small yet rich volume teems with stimulating ideas and insights about locating and understanding texts written from a cultural perspective or within a cultural context that

4. Raimundo Lazo, *La novela andina* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1971).

5. See Richard L. Jackson, *Black Writers in Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979); and Marvin A. Lewis, *Afro-Hispanic Poetry, 1940–1980: From Slavery to “Negritud” in South American Verse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983).

6. See, for example, Manuel Zapata Olivella, “Creación y autenticidad: América mestiza, un gran tema de novela,” *El Tiempo*, 10 Nov. 1963, Lecturas Dominicales section, p. 3; and Zapata Olivella, *¡Levántate, mulato! ‘Por mi raza hablará el espíritu’* (Bogotá: Rei Andes, 1991).

deviates from European models, texts that demand and deserve to be appreciated on their own terms. For example, the authors' discussions of center-periphery relationships go beyond the usual references to metropolis and colony to include internal conflicts occurring within postcolonial societies themselves. Because these societies have often tended to mimic and incorporate values and attitudes of the imperial center (such as universalism), historically disdained cultural groups have often been doubly marginalized. Thus populations of African descent and their literary spokespersons often find themselves "pushed to the psychic and political edge of societies that themselves have experienced the dilemma of colonial alienation" (p. 144).<sup>7</sup>

*The Empire Writes Back* is part of Routledge's New Accents series, which is intended for clarification, as the general editor points out, and it therefore does not assume that readers have a great deal of theoretical knowledge on the subject. Taking its title from a statement made by noted Indian-born British novelist Salman Rushdie, *The Empire Writes Back* is written for the most part in a comprehensible style. Despite the claim that it is addressed to a nonspecialized audience, however, the authors assume that readers are generally familiar with terms like *metonymy*, *synecdoche*, *episteme*, and *epistemology*. Moreover, sections dealing with language are frequently opaque. In addition to the introduction, five main chapters, and conclusion, the book also includes a "Reader's Guide" consisting of an annotated list of theoretical and critical studies, a suggested guide to these readings, and a brief selection of studies of national and regional literatures. The volume also offers a general bibliography and a useful index.

In assessing and validating the adoption of broader perspectives and wider contexts for comprehending literature, *The Empire Writes Back* offers a fresh point of departure for reconsidering literary texts that have been ignored, disdained, or misunderstood, for studying more recent works, and for reexamining the canonical texts that have long set the standards by which postcolonial works are evaluated.<sup>8</sup> As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin aver, "to change the canon is to do more than change the legitimized texts. It is to change the conditions of readings for all texts" (p. 176).

7. For a lucid example of this situation, see Jaime Arocha Rodríguez, "Afro-Colombia Denied," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, no. 25 (Feb. 1992):28–31. This issue devoted to *The Black Americas* also features articles on the Dominican Republic, Brazil, and Cuba. Other essays on this topic may be found in *Contribución a la cultura de las Américas*, a volume of papers and presentations from the September 1992 colloquium of the same name, edited by Astrid Ulloa (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología, 1993).

8. I am not suggesting, however, that the perspectives and ideas presented here are completely new. In the early 1970s, for example, George Kent questioned the matter of universalism in *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture* (Chicago, Ill.: Third World, 1972).

The “Reader’s Guide” in *The Empire Writes Back* rightly describes *Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, edited by Daryl Cumber Dance, as “an invaluable recent reference work” (p. 210). Its essays, arranged in alphabetical order according to the last name of each writer, are intended by Dance “to introduce the reader to the wide range of important Caribbean writers, from the pioneers to the contemporaries” (p. 7). Following a set pattern, each essay opens with a biography of the writer, moves into an extensive critical discussion of major works and themes, reviews selected scholarship, and lists significant honors and awards accorded to the writer. A bibliography of works by and about the individual writer concludes each essay. The final pages of this attractive volume contain a general bibliography, indexes by name, title, and subject, and information about the contributors.

Dance’s introduction provides a succinct description of the origins, development, salient characteristics, and problems and challenges of Caribbean literature and also summarizes the state of critical studies on individual authors and the region as a whole. She thus illustrates and anticipates the theoretical commentaries on Caribbean literature and writers put forth in *The Empire Writes Back*, thereby suggesting how much Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin might have drawn on this book. On the subject of Caribbean literature, the two books complement each other.

But it must be pointed out at once that the term *Caribbean* as used here encompasses only the English-speaking islands of the West Indies and the South American nation of Guyana (formerly British Guiana). The dominance and wide acceptance of English as *the* international language and the tendency to associate the literature of the Spanish-speaking Antilles (such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and even Puerto Rico) with Latin American or Spanish American writing have paradoxically resulted in a narrow scholarly definition of the Caribbean region as English-speaking, regardless of its linguistic diversity. Thus in many quarters, a discussion of “Caribbean literature” is assumed to refer exclusively to the English-speaking areas. In any case, the editor’s failure to mention forthrightly the geolinguistic boundaries of *Fifty Caribbean Writers* seems to imply that the reader will understand and accept such limitations.

This caveat notwithstanding, *Fifty Caribbean Writers* has value for scholars and students of Latin America. The names of several of the writers treated here, such as poet and critic Edward Braithwaite and historians Orlando Patterson and C. L. R. James, are or should be familiar to members of the profession. Similarly, Latin Americanists whose interests cross linguistic, national, and disciplinary boundaries are probably conversant with the names of Claude McKay and George Lamming. Surely, general readers have heard of—if not read—Jamaica Kincaid, V. S. Naipaul, and recent Nobel laureate Derek Walcott. Likewise, those involved in Afro-Hispanic literature may already be acquainted with writers Sylvia



Wynter and O. R. Dathorne, who also study the literature of the black diaspora.

More important, the individual essays bring out themes common to the broad sweep of Caribbean literature, such as exile and alienation, the search for identity, language, and the question of tradition. They also raise several timely issues pertinent to canonicity and non-European writers in general and Afro-Hispanic writers in particular. For example, the inclusion of internationally recognized authors along with others whose reputations are more limited brings to mind the sensitive question of determining which authors and texts deserve to be researched, taught, and studied in school and college curricula, what criteria are used to arrive at this determination, and who makes such decisions. The essays by Eugenia Collier on C. L. R. James and by Edward Baugh on Frank Collymore underscore the importance of having one's work published in widely circulated journals and other publications that can bring the writer "to the attention of metropolitan countries" (p. 230), that is, to a larger and more influential readership. Given the fact that attention from critics (or the lack thereof) can often influence readers' perceptions and acceptance of an author and his or her work, the role of critics also deserves consideration. All of these matters provide insight into the marginalization or exclusion of Spanish American writers of African descent such as Colombians Manuel Zapata Olivella (1920– ), Candelario Obeso (1849–1884), Jorge Artel (1909–1994), and Arnaldo Palacios (1926– ), Costa Rican Quince Duncan (1940– ), Cuban Nancy Morejón (1944– ), and Ecuadorian Nelson Estupiñán Bass (1915– ).

Ian Smart, a native of Trinidad and an admittedly Afrocentric scholar, confronts the matter of exclusion and exclusivity in *Nicolás Guillén: Popular Poet of the Caribbean*. Guillén—a Cuban poet and undoubtedly the most celebrated contemporary Afro-Hispanic writer—is, according to Smart, "outside a restricted academic circle . . . , a totally unknown entity in the general non-Hispanic Caribbean" (p. 160). Smart suggests that this state of affairs can be attributed to the language barrier. Departing significantly from the perspective reflected in *Fifty Caribbean Writers*, Smart takes issue with the unilingual approach to Caribbean literature and culture, envisioning the "truly Pan-Caribbean literary scholar" as one "fluent in two or more of the languages of the area" (p. 7). Furthermore, as he points out, scholars from the Anglophone Caribbean islands "prefer to maintain the traditional distinction between *West Indian* and *Caribbean*," reserving the former term for themselves (p. 2).

Aiming in a sense at bridging the gulf separating the Spanish-speaking Antilles from the English-speaking West Indies, Smart adopts the racially informed perspective of the latter to demonstrate that "West Indianness is an essential feature of Nicolás Guillén's poetic art" (p. 2). He uses the terms *West Indian*, *Caribbean*, and *Antillean* interchangeably: "The

connection between West Indian and Antillean is unimpeachably valid linguistically, historically, and indeed culturally" (p. 5). For Smart, the basis of that connection is the African heritage, which he views as "the most important component of West Indian culture" (p. 5). As Smart states at the outset of his study, the "African West Indian character accounts for the originality and basic value of Guillén's art and links Guillén inextricably to the rich popular poetic tradition of the region" (pp. 2–3).

Smart's bold confrontation of the "issue of intellectual decolonization" (p. 6), his emphasis on language (pp. 50–56), and his affirmation of syncretism as a central feature of Afro-American culture (p. 117) all align him with postcolonial literary theory as presented in *The Empire Writes Back*. Smart's *Nicolás Guillén* is intended not merely as an exercise in erudition but as an agent in "the dialogue between the forces of liberation and those that perpetuate the socioeconomic and cultural status quo, the old imperialism that has dominated so many of us for so long and that seeks subtly (and not so subtly) to maintain its paralyzing sway, imposing theoretical approaches that are largely irrelevant and ultimately limiting" (p. 6). In order to approach Guillén's art "from the perspective of a peculiarly Caribbean sensibility," Smart insists on the necessity of uncovering or developing an indigenous West Indian literary theory (p. 26). Such a theory would account for the Cuban writer's individual creative genius and also relate it to "the peculiar creative genius of other West Indian literary figures" (p. 6). Smart locates the foundations for such a theory in "the traditional literary aesthetics already in place in the region" (p. 9), in popular oral poetry of the Caribbean such as the Trinidadian *kaiso*, Jamaican reggae, the *plena* and the *bomba* of Puerto Rico, and various Cuban forms such as the *son* and the rumba.

Throughout this well-written and provocative book, Smart draws on a wide range of sources to ground his ideas and support his ambitious undertaking: leading exponents and students of Caribbean popular art forms (Bob Marley, Benny Moré, Keith Warner, Errol Hill, Raymond Quevedo), forerunners and pioneers of contemporary Afrocentric thought (E. A. Wallis Budge, Cheikh Anta Diop), African and Caribbean writers and thinkers (Leopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Claude McKay, V. S. Naipaul, Edward Brathwaite, C. L. R. James, Eulalia Bernard), Spanish American critics (Rito Llerena Villalobos, Octavio Paz), and European philosophers and scholars (Blaise Pascal, Jean Paul Sartre, Janheinz Jahn). Smart also acknowledges and even builds on earlier studies of Guillén's poetry, such as Vera Kutzinski's *Against the American Grain*.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, he challenges and seeks to move beyond what he considers their Western scholarly orientation by demonstrating the African roots of the Cuban *son*

9. . Vera M. Kutzinski, *Against the American Grain* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).



and the Caribbean carnival, two popular elements found in Guillén's poetry (pp. 35–45). Smart employs (British) West Indian dialect when translating the "colorful negro talk" of Guillén's *Motivos de son*, which subtly reinforces Smart's contention that Guillén's poetry is intimately connected with the popular orality of the non-Hispanic Caribbean (pp. 103, 140).

Although Smart affirms syncretism as characteristic of Caribbean culture, his view of this union or reconciliation of differences seems somewhat limited and limiting. In positing duality stemming from the confluence of African and European elements as the hallmark of West Indianness or Caribbeanness and in broadening his remarks to encompass the Antilles and the wider Caribbean Basin of the Central and South American mainland, Smart seems to ignore the diversity existing in this area and within the broad African-American experience. For example, he asserts that for Guillén, *mulatez* is "a dialectical relationship between Europe and Africa" and "the source of his creativity" (p. 163). Later, Smart concludes that "it is precisely this *mulatez* that links Guillén's art so closely to the Caribbean sensibility and culture" and that "this same duality is at the core of West Indianness or Caribbeanness" (p. 172). The next sentence, however, begins to reveal the limitations of this concept of duality. Smart states somewhat categorically, "Every Caribbean artistic expression examined in these chapters—from the Caribbean *son* to the kaiso of Trinidad and Tobago or the Colombian *vallenato*—results from some synthesis of African and European elements" (p. 172). Here he overlooks the more complex situation of a country like Colombia, where (unlike Cuba) the native Amerindian presence still exists among the inhabitants and in the culture. This reality has been affirmed by two eminent writers of African ancestry from Colombia's Atlantic Coast: poet Jorge Artel and novelist Manuel Zapata Olivella, both of whom frequently identify themselves and the culture of their coastal homeland as *triétnico*.<sup>10</sup> Rito Llerena Villalobos's study of the *vallenato*,<sup>11</sup> which Smart cites, as well as other sources indicate that this musical expression derives not only from European and African elements but also from indigenous elements.<sup>12</sup>

10. See Jorge Artel, "Modalidades artísticas de la raza negra," *Muros* 1 (June 1940):17 (published in Cartagena); Manuel Zapata Olivella, *El hombre colombiano* (Bogotá: Canal Ramírez-Antares, 1974); Zapata Olivella, *Las claves mágicas de América (raza, clase, cultura)* (Bogotá: Plaza y Janés, 1989); and his previously cited *¡Levántate, mulato!* These writers' embrace of the indigenous element, however, is in no way analogous to that of many Dominican citizens who prefer to call themselves "*indio*" to avoid association with any African heritage, particularly as represented by neighboring Haiti. Nor is it similar to the custom of some racially mixed African-Americans of the United States, who out of disdain or fear rejected the designation "Negro"—and with it black identity and African roots—and gave primacy to their Native American ancestors by referring to themselves as "Indian."

11. Rito Llerena Villalobos, *Memoria cultural en el vallenato: un modelo de textualidad en la canción folclórica colombiana* (Medellín: Centro de Investigaciones, Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Universidad de Antioquia, 1985).

12. See, for example, Ciro Quiroz Otero, *Vallenato: hombre y canto* (Bogotá: Icaro, 1983). A

These shortcomings aside, *Nicolás Guillén: Popular Poet of the Caribbean* makes an enlightening contribution to scholarship on Guillén, Caribbean literature and culture, and Afro-Hispanic writing. Even though Smart's attempt to devise an indigenous literary theory rooted in Caribbean reality may not correspond exactly to the kind of new critical vision that Yvonne Captain-Hidalgo suggests is needed for Afro-Hispanism, it participates in "the ontological questioning that strives to arrive at some of the very essence of a given culture."<sup>13</sup> That in itself is a significant accomplishment.

Afrocentricity is also central to Marvin Lewis's *Ethnicity and Identity in Contemporary Afro-Venezuelan Literature*. Here Lewis examines four Venezuelan literary works that "offer interpretations of the black experience" (p. 1). Lewis devotes one of the book's four chapters to each of the four works, originally published over a forty-year span: Juan Pablo Sojo's *Nochebuena negra* (1943), Ramón Díaz Sánchez's *Cumboto* (1950), Manuel Rodríguez Cárdenas's *Tambor: poemas para negros y mulatos* (1938), and Antonio Acosta Márquez's *Yo pienso aquí donde . . . Estoy* (1977).

Taking his lead from the late professor and critic Joseph Sommers, Lewis adopts what he calls a "culturalist approach" in which his evaluation "is based on the notion that Afro-Venezuelan literature is culturally unique because it expresses some of the distinctive features of Afro-Venezuelan shared, learned behavior" (p. 1). Lewis sets out to examine the four works in light of Venezuela's "notions of an African past, its myths, its linguistic and thematic survivals, its folk beliefs, its societal iniquities [sic], and its development of an Afro-Venezuelan worldview" and to apply to each "elements of both formalist and historical/ dialectical criticism in close readings" (p. 2). The aim, then, is "to interpret some of the relationships between literature and society in Afro-Venezuelan literature" (p. 5). Unfortunately, all this conceptual framework remains somewhat sketchy, making it difficult to determine the ultimate point of the analyses and interpretations, especially as they relate to matters of ethnicity and perhaps racial identity in Venezuelan literature.

Despite the fact that Lewis's bibliography lists several publications on the specific works he discusses and on Afro-Venezuelan literature in general, he laments a dearth of "serious criticism" on the literature. He comments, "Literature of the black experience in Venezuela is usually read as folkloric and quaint, but not worthy of rigorous critical scrutiny" (p. 4). He also notes much ambivalence among Venezuelan intellectuals and critics regarding the existence of "an Afro-Venezuelan literary consciousness"

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recent publication specifying the European, Native American, and African origins of the three main instruments of vallenato music is Consuelo Araujonoguera, *Lexicón del Valle de Upar* (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 1994), 202.

13. Yvonne Captain-Hidalgo, "Writing for the Future: Afro-Hispanism in a Global, Critical Context," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 13 (Spring 1994):3-9, citation on 5.

(p. 12). Consequently, Lewis concludes, “Sojo and Acosta Márquez are yet to be viewed as serious creative writers in Venezuela” (p. 109).

Leaning on Afrocentric writings by Molefi Kete Asante and Josaphat Kubayanda, Lewis regards the works of Sojo and Acosta Márquez (whom he calls “black writers”) as “serious attempts to reclaim African orality and reappropriate African myths and metaphysics through cultural authenticity” (p. 14).<sup>14</sup> Yet while Lewis perceives Díaz Sánchez’s prose fiction and Rodríguez Cárdenas’s poetry as also inspired by Afro-Venezuelan culture, their works “appear to be at the margin of black existence” (p. 14). The last two authors, whom Lewis categorizes as “well-meaning mestizo writers and vacillating mulattoes,” write outside of black culture (p. 4). Lewis implies that writers who are not black, notwithstanding their strong interest and even sincere dedication to black culture, cannot penetrate beneath the surface of that world. As he concludes at the end of his chapter on Rodríguez Cárdenas, “It is necessary to have more than a surface knowledge of black culture in order to imbue works with an Afrocentric vision, a phenomenon that comes from within rather than from without” (p. 68).

Throughout *Ethnicity and Identity in Contemporary Afro-Venezuelan Literature*, Lewis discusses and explains themes, imagery, and events and also points out matters of language, symbolism, and verse forms. His detailed explanations and comments on folklore and religion are informative, as on the “Mampulorio” (pp. 26–28). But the attempted culturalist approach notwithstanding, one senses little actual exploration of the relationship between text and context—be it cultural, social, historical, or political. For example, except in the chapter on Rodríguez Cárdenas, Lewis’s discussions of the literary works for the most part do not relate directly to the historical and cultural milieu from which they emerged. One would like to know, for example, what accounts for the thirteen-year gap between the writing of Sojo’s *Nochebuena negra* and its publication in 1943 (p. 13). Also, Lewis’s description of Rodríguez Cárdenas’s poem “Apuntes para un close-up de Eusebia Cosme” as merely “a salute to a woman of African descent” (p. 59) suggests unawareness of the international renown of this important Afro-Cuban *declamadora* and her influential role in disseminating *negrista* poetry.

Lewis performs a useful service for English-speaking readers by translating into English titles and excerpts from the literary works. For secondary sources in Spanish, however, he provides only his own translations. Those who read Spanish may miss access to the Spanish originals in order to evaluate and appreciate Lewis’s assessments. Indeed, some

14. Compare Winthrop R. Wright, *Café con leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 113. Wright describes Sojo as a “mulatto author.”

translations are a bit faulty, suggesting possible failure to discern nuances of meaning that may be relevant to the overall import of a work. For example, the phrase “los caños se hinchan” (p. 22) from *Nochebuena negra* is rendered as “the canes sink,” when it actually refers to the swelling of pipes or gutters that carry streams of water down or through a hill. This meaning makes more sense in light of the parallel swelling (or perhaps overflowing) of the river described by Tuy immediately afterward in the novel. Elsewhere the line “Menía [sic] la cintura. Sacá bien lo pechos. Dale despacito . . .” from a Rodríguez Cárdenas poem is translated as “She wiggled her waist, thrust her breasts out. Does it slowly” (p. 56). In reality, the verbs (including *Menía* in the original) are in the imperative form and not the indicative mode used in his translation. Lewis also seems to have introduced an awkward shift in tense.

Despite these problems, *Ethnicity and Identity in Contemporary Afro-Venezuelan Literature* adds instructively to the study of literature and culture in the Afro-Hispanic world. Lewis’s focus on four works that apparently have received little critical attention in the United States and Venezuela increases awareness of the African presence in Venezuelan literature, as both creators of texts and their objects. The bibliography contains primary and secondary sources not included in José Marcial Ramos Guédez’s important “Bibliografía sobre literatura afrovenezolana,” thus enhancing the earlier compilation.<sup>15</sup> In sum, Lewis’s book brings to the attention of scholars and students a variety of texts—literary, anthropological, historical—that are not ordinarily mentioned in literary studies, while exposing students of Latin American studies and literature to new authors and works. In doing so, Lewis’s study may also help these authors keep their works in print.

Although the African presence in Venezuela is undeniable, Cuba remains the Spanish American country with the strongest traditions of African origin. *Cultura afrocubana: Las religiones y las lenguas*, the third volume of an excellent series by Jorge and Isabel Castellanos, certainly maintains that reputation.<sup>16</sup> The first three chapters of the third volume explain in detail three major religious practices in Cuba that derived from African ethnic groups: the Lucumí, from which Santería originates, the Congas, and the secret society of Abakuá or the *ñáñigos*.

The importance of religion in Afro-Hispanic and Caribbean communities is well known.<sup>17</sup> In postcolonial societies, religion can serve as a

15. See José Marcial Ramos Guédez, *El negro en la novela venezolana* (Caracas: Dirección de Cultura, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1980), 97–132.

16. The earlier volumes are *Cultura afrocubana 1: El negro en Cuba, 1492–1844* (Miami, Fla.: Ediciones Universal, 1988); and *Cultura afrocubana 2: El negro en Cuba, 1845–1959* (Miami, Fla.: Ediciones Universal, 1990).

17. See, for example, George Eaton Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World* (Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1978).

major feature of difference, that is, as a marker of ethnic identity, as a sign of resistance to assimilation and absorption, and even as an element of national ethos. The five Hispanic authors treated by Smart and Lewis (Guillén, Sojo, Díaz Sánchez, Rodríguez Cárdenas, and Acosta Márquez) all incorporate into their literary texts references to or recreations of various religious practices and beliefs of African origin. Some of the subjects of *Fifty Caribbean Writers* (such as Claude McKay) also exhibit similar concern and use of intertextuality. The copious information on Afro-Cuban religions presented in *Cultura afrocubana* enables the readers of many Afro-Cuban literary works to appreciate the significance and role of such beliefs and practices in these writings.

The fourth and final chapter of the book, "Las lenguas afrocubanas," is particularly relevant to the subject of this review. Many of the authors' remarks echo or parallel ideas and affirmations presented elsewhere (as on syncretism), thus extending the book's applicability beyond the island nation. For example, their reference to various factors that favored the retention of African languages in Cuba (p. 287) supports assertions made by Juan Pablo Sojo that African religious and linguistic elements are less pronounced in Venezuela than in Cuba (cited by Lewis, pp. 8–9).<sup>18</sup> Other statements in *Cultura afrocubana* recall observations made in *The Empire Writes Back* about the value or prestige accorded the metropolitan language over the local or creolized version and the native tongue. An example is this comment, "El español es el vehículo de la literatura escrita, la lengua de la educación" (p. 300).

As other books discussed here point out, language is another major feature of difference in postcolonial societies. It is not surprising, therefore, to read in *Cultura afrocubana*, "El idioma, en la época plantacional y por algún tiempo después, constituía un poderoso marcador social que se empleaba para colocar a cada cual 'en su sitio'" (p. 354). In Hispanic and Caribbean literatures dealing with peoples of African descent, the language chosen or used for a given work may indicate a speaker's specific class or group (as in the use of *bozal* speech in nineteenth-century Cuban literature, pp. 323–25). It may also denote a particular perspective

18. Sojo's assertion also reminds us that although Latin Americanists may speak of Latin American literature as a whole, we must not forget that each country within this vast region is a separate entity with its own history and its own literary tradition. Consequently, even though countries like Cuba and Colombia were both conquered and colonized by the Spanish, imported enslaved Africans to perform the heavy labor that enriched their colonial coffers, now count sizable numbers of persons of African descent among their population, and have produced several outstanding writers and admirable works of literature, their literary traditions—especially the part related to people of African descent—differ in many respects. I demonstrate this point by contrasting briefly the Afro-Cuban literary heritage and the difficulties encountered by blacks writing in Colombia in "Perfil del autor afrocolombiano: problemas y perspectivas," forthcoming in *América Negra*. My book manuscript on Colombian poet Jorge Artel and the struggle for black literary expression in Colombia also elaborates on this question.

or attitude adopted by the author, as in the use of *costeño* dialect in the *Cantos populares de mi tierra* by Colombian Romantic poet Candelario Obeso.<sup>19</sup> But clearly, as Lewis suggests, the use of dialect to create or project a voice or sense of authenticity is no guarantee that such an effect will be achieved.

All the books presented here illuminate directly or indirectly major aspects and directions of Afro-Hispanic and Caribbean literatures and criticism. Their publication and content illustrate how far academic scholarship has come in the past thirty years in acknowledging new and divergent approaches to literature and in admitting different voices and previously silenced discourses. Nevertheless, daily experience shows that the discoveries and advances of Afro-Hispanic research have not significantly broadened scholarly appreciation for the field as reflected in graduate reading lists, curricula, and classroom instruction. Even today, beginning and advanced graduate students in Latin American studies and literature programs still learn little about the integral role played by African peoples in the formation and development of Latin American societies and cultures. Students also have little exposure to the ways in which writers have drawn on the experiences and perspectives of Africans in the Americas to create their literary works. Scholars and teachers of Latin American literature need to diversify and strengthen their own knowledge of the region's history, societies, and cultures in order to better incorporate it into their work. Clearly, if Afro-Hispanic, Caribbean, and postcolonial texts and discourses are regarded as peripheral or marginal to the center of language and literature programs or as appropriate primarily for "minority students," many Latin Americanists will remain ignorant of the information and perspectives presented by the critical and theoretical works reviewed here. By using and improving on such studies and facilitating their incorporation into the common core of programs of language, literature, and civilization, scholars and teachers will enhance the intellectual growth of all concerned.

19. For a study of this collection and information on Obeso, see Laurence E. Prescott, *Candelario Obeso y la iniciación de la poesía negra en Colombia* (Bogotá: Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 1985).