

Homenaje a Manuel Zapata Olivella

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It is difficult to fathom that my mentor and friend left us more than sixteen years ago. Manuel Zapata Olivella was a great talent and an honorable man—albeit a bit rakish! Reflecting on my precious time with him and through our correspondence brings me great joy.

I first “met” Manuel as a 17 year-old college student when discovering in the library his 1963 novel *Chambacú, corral de negros* (*Chambacú: Black Slum*). It was my first inkling that there were black people in Latin America outside of Brazil. After I mustered the courage to write to him, he wrote me back! Thus began a mentor relationship and later friendship that lasted a lifetime.

A psychiatrist, by profession, Manuel was the inquisitive type never ceasing to acquire knowledge. He took it upon himself to learn-by-doing ethnography and anthropology, all the while maintaining a cheerful intellectualism that would tug at the heart of any reader or listener of his words. Psychoanalysis and reflections on the human spirit are evident in both his fictional works as well as in his memoirs and essays. Radical before it was chic, there was a type of urgency in his works that to this day resonates. It boggles the mind why the world does not know about him—as they do the other great global talents.

His literature, although worthy, somehow never made it to the classroom of most universities. I studied under some of the most progressive scholars of the period when the “boom” writers were just coming into prominence. Moreover, we could count on maybe four women writers—all poets—to form part of the curriculum: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the trinity of Latin American women—Juana de Ibarbournu, Gabriela Mistral and Alfonsina Storni. Except for the lone Nicolás Guillén, no writers who claimed African descent formed part of our readings. We read the criticism of Pedro Henríquez Ureña without any mention of his Afro-Dominican background. This was a period when focus changed from novels of the land and protest novels—which were part of Manuel’s repertoire. However, he also wrote short stories and novels that kept pace with the varying characteristics of the writers in classroom focus. Yet, few if any departments of Spanish would include his magnificent works. By the time of his 1983 masterpiece *Changó, el gran putas* (*Chango, the Biggest Badass*), those of us “in the know” were certain that Latin American intellectuals and

their counterparts in the United States would embrace him uncategorically. Like a few of his earlier novels, *Changó* had a clear new-narrative style that was equal to the authors we studied in school, including most of the boom writers. There was even talk about nominating him for the Nobel Prize for literature. Alas, this was not to be, as his death foreclosed on such aspirations.

As someone working on her dissertation by the time *Changó* appeared in publication, I was certain that he would soon be among the elite cadres of Latin American novelists. The anticipation of his inclusion was not for the sake of vanity, although what artist prefers to produce work after work without recognition? One primary reason for wishing him publishing success to coincide with his aesthetic genius was to achieve commercial success. One characteristic that the boom writers ushered into Latin American culture was the ability of a writer to live from his literature, without having to work in other jobs. Even the Argentine Borges, the most recognized literary talent before the boom and whose works precede the boom writers by a generation, had to work for a living. He simply did not earn enough from his publications to work at his craft. Zapata, a psychiatrist by training and a self-taught anthropologist, earned money from the former and sought grants for the latter. And what a considerable contribution his anthropological studies made. Even though we assumed he would join the pantheon of the continually read whose literature reached other cosmopolitan areas as well as the classroom, that has yet to be. Individual professors take it upon themselves to include his works in their syllabi, but there has been no movement toward adding Manuel to what we still think of as a canon of necessary works that students need to read before graduation. At least, not until now.

Fortunately, within Manuel’s native Colombia there are celebrations of his centennial that will eventually radiate outward to other countries of the world. The documentary by Director Aguado, the gradual publication of all of his works under one editorial house, and a flurry of activities that will culminate in a symposium should assure this. Consult “Año Centenario de Manuel Zapata Olivella”: <http://zapataolivella.univalle.edu.co> and the digital library on Zapata at Vanderbilt University: <https://mzo.library.vanderbilt.edu>. These are two marvelous breakthroughs that give Zapata’s followers the

sense that he will finally reach the large audience that needs to find him. African Diaspora Studies in the United States will probably be the first to marvel at this “new” genius. However, as has been the case often in Latin America, once the rest of the world praises a great figure, Latin Americans claim him or her as their own. Moreover, as one sees lately, countries are awakening to their own deeply rooted prejudices of all kinds during the protests over the murder of George Floyd. It is clear the part of the inability to recognize Manuel as a formidable writer is due to his Afro-centric stance. Fortunately, people are genuinely asking how they can make life better for all their citizens. It is possible to see this in Colombia and the whole of Latin America.

Within African Diaspora thought, there is movement toward recognizing the great intellectuals who lead us to where we are today. Thankfully, there is a cadre of Afro-Latin scholars who are able to bring to the table a discussion about Manuel’s contribution to a sense of Diaspora culture and thought. However, the age-old issue of translation continues to be a problem, even though younger scholars typically know more than one language before receiving the Ph.D. Several of his novels receive translation, and two of those often make it into scholarly works. Consider his groundbreaking *Changó*, as well as *Chambacú* that I mentioned above. However, little of his writing beyond the novels that manifest his worldview receive translation or receive study. The difficult, brilliant work and organization by Dean Darío Henao of Universidad del Valle in Medellín, Colombia as well as the equally impressive body of work by Dr. William Mina go a long way in sharing Manuel’s talent with the Spanish-speaking world. However, Zapata needs to be among the intellectuals regularly appearing in scholarly treatises about the Diaspora’s makeup. In order for this to happen, translations into English of his essays must occur.

Essential to understanding Manuel’s writings is the truth that this wonderful human being constantly referred to himself as a vagabond. Indeed, throughout his adult life, he could not resist the urge to travel. Throughout Latin America, all over the United States, to Senegal, China, Russia and other places, Manuel made himself at home. He made friends along the way, many of them famous, but others were the ordinary people he so loved to befriend. It is no wonder that I ran into my parapetetic buddy twice in separate airports. Once he was returning from a country in Africa to El Dorado Airport in Colombia as I was entering to do some research. No surprise there. The second time, I was so shocked to see him at my hotel in Caracas, Venezuela that the jolt of seeing him was so genuine that people around me thought I would faint. We chatted for a while, and he gave me my first copy of *iLevántate mulato!* with a playful inscription as only he could write.

There is a final personal observation about my friend the writer and psychiatrist, even though I have no background in psychology to back up my comments. Manuel must have been affected by the occasional struggle with the all-too-familiar

polemic in U.S. black America—not black enough. Colorism in reverse. Born in Lorica, a small town not far from Cartagena, he was not from Chocó where over 90% of the population is black; nor was he from the Palenque de San Basilio—a maroon community in the Atlantic coast region and still very much alive in the twenty-first century. Instead, his indigenous pre-Columbian and white Spanish roots run deep—as it does for many in the area from which he hails. Rather than deny those roots, Manuel embraced them. One often reads in his work the term “tri-ethnic”. His black critics—by no means all of Afro-Colombia—wanted him to address only those issues that affect black people. Yet, no one should deny the brilliance in his artistic rendering of peasants’ belief in the saintliness of a young acolyte whose body somehow never decays years after his death. The depiction of the missing indigenous boy sensitizes even the most cynical reader as the psychiatrist tries to piece together the fragmented observations about his disappearance. The working poor and street dwellers who awaken to their plight and rebel, albeit to an unfavorable end, forces the reader to consider the plight of the poor. A short story that mocks his fellow upper class colleagues for their lives without moral anchors leaves anyone pondering what it means to have an education, but not use it towards the betterment of the country’s citizens. All of these works that do not have black people at the center of the narrative come from the same author. What they have in common with Zapata’s black works is his unique style. It also ties him to the pantheon of writers who continue to be classroom musts in academia. Yet, thematically, the above works also say what others say. It is through his works with a decidedly black focus that Zapata makes an indelible mark on Colombian, Latin American and world letters.

We the academics, students and activists need to ensure his place in global letters. For those who have yet to read his works, now is the time to do so. Not all of what he writes appears in English translation—so far. Especially his essays and memoirs do not reach a wider audience outside of Spanish speakers. One option is for the reader to brush up on the college-level Spanish, and read the brilliance that awaits.