



PALARA

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Publication of the Afro–Latin/American Research Association (*PALARA*)

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PALARA

Publication of the Afro-Latin/American Research Association

Special Issue: Afro-Diasporic Protest: Black Women's Resistance in Cali and in the Black Pacific Guest

Editors: Sarah Soanirina Ohmer, Aurora Vergara Figueroa, Melissa Gómez Hernández [Deadlines](#)

*** Abstracts of 250 words due August 15, 2021**

* Invitations for full-length essays will be sent by October 1, 2021

* Essays of 18-25 pages, as per Author Guidelines, due March 1, 2022

*** Revisions due June 1, 2022**

Please send all abstracts to the guest editors at palara2022@gmail.com

PALARA (Publication of Afro-Latin American Research Association) is a multi-disciplinary journal that publishes research and creativity relevant to diaspora studies in the Americas. The editors of the journal, Dr. Sonja Watson and Dr. Dorothy Mosby, invite you to send your abstracts to this special issue on *Afro-Diasporic and Decolonial Feminisms/Queer Thought*, edited by Drs Sarah Ohmer, Melissa Gómez Hernández, and Aurora Vergara Figueroa.

The seventh year since the United Nations' International Decade for People of African descent, 10 years since the Afro-Diasporic Conspiracy Manifesto (2011), and 44 years since the Combahee Collective Manifesto (1977), 2021 marks one of the most violent years of violence against Afro-Colombians, especially in Cali, against black women and LGBTQ+ people. In Latin America, Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean, a community of scholars has been steadily publishing on State repression, though seldom on the resistance of Black women outside of Brazil and the Caribbean. The militancy of Black women and LGBTQ+ groups deserve further scholarly attention. This call invites submissions from underrepresented artists, activists, and scholars, on protest, grassroots organizations, and community projects. We welcome work on black women's activism, political actions, political theory, activist scholarship, produced outside of Cuba and Brazil, particularly on the Pacific Coast. Since the 1970s, Afro-Latin American Studies and Black Resistance has grown into a transnational scholarly community of queer, trans, womyn, and women focused on Black feminist/ Black decolonial thought and activism for the liberation and rights of black LGBTQ+ girls, trans or cisgendered women, and non-binary individuals. We encourage submissions on their activist theory in relation to Afro-Diasporic Feminisms, Decolonial Anti-Racist Feminist work by people of African descent, Black Queer Thought, and militancy.

From the militancy of Nanny, Akotirene, and Sojourner Truth to the scholarship and activism of Carla Akotirene, Ochy Curiel, Tanya Saunders, Marielle Franco, Francia Márquez, and the Mujeres del Oriente, the references of black women and black queer work are infinite, yet understudied.



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This issue will complement the *Journal of International Women's Studies* and *Meridians* Special Issues on Latin American and Afro-Latin American Feminisms, the *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* *Journal* KuirLombo Epistemologies issue, and *Women's Studies Quarterly* "Solidão" Issue, to contribute a more diverse representation of Afro-Diasporic activist resistance by women and LGBTQ+ people.

We encourage submissions focusing on queer of color and/or Afro-Indigenous activists, critical scholars, and artists, including co-authored essays. We will accept essays in Spanish, Portuguese, French, and English, focused on Black women or Black LGBTQ+ **and** one or more of the topics below.

- Resistance to state-mandated violence
- Afrodiasporic Conspiracies
- Territorialidad
- Afrodiasporic and indigenous movements
- AIDS / SIDA
- Black women's marches
- Street, urban, rural protest or organizing
- Protest film, art, performance
- Social media and digital resistance
- Policy-making, political campaigns by Black women/LGBTQ+
- Struggle for Rights and Access
- Disability Studies
- 21st Century Girlhood Studies

We welcome work on Cali/Southwest Colombia in comparison with other oppressed territories:

- The Black Pacific in Latin America, Central America, the Caribbean, Mexico, U.S., Canada
- The Black Pacific, in comparison with the Circum-Caribbean, the Black Atlantic
- Afro-Latinx Feminisms in the U.S./Canada

Authors that may be subjects of/referenced in essays: Lélia González, Ochy Curiel, Yuderkis Espinoza, Marta Moreno Vega, Oyèronké Oyewú mí, Mara Viveros, Flávia Rios, Sylvia Wynter, Tanya L. Saunders, Gloria Anzaldúa, *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latina Diaspora*, "Afrodiasporic Feminist Conspiracy: Motivations and Paths forward from the First International Seminar." *Meridians* 14-2 (2016) by Aurora Vergara and Katherine Arboleda Hurtado.

References to recent journals may include: *Journal of International Women's Studies* and *Meridians* Special Issues on Latin American and Afro-Latin American Feminisms, the *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* *Journal* KuirLombo Epistemologies issue, and *Women's Studies Quarterly* "Solidão" Issue.

Editors' Note

Welcome to the 25th issue of the Publication of the Afro/Latin American Review Association. The works that populate this issue center on literary critiques of Cuba of the past and the present and bring to us creative writing from the small, but mighty nation of Panama.

Damaris Puñales-Alpizar's "Socialismo mulato: Soviet Fascination with Race in Cuba" argues that in "the Soviet imaginary, the Cuban mulato represented not only an exotic other but also the realization of another kind of socialism, possible in other conditions and at other coordinates, (almost) far from Soviet reach."

Amy King's, "Opposing Worldviews: A New Perspective on Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's Failure in the Congo," revisits Che Guevara and provides a new reading of the figure by "reexam[ining] Western portrayals of African and Hispanic history and depict[ing] Che Guevara's failure in the Congo through a more inclusive scope of cultural misunderstanding" by revisiting Che's "revolution to liberate the oppressed Congolese from imperialist intervention." Thus, her work reinserts Africa and the African experience into the decades-long discussion on Che Guevara.

Dawn F. Stinchcomb's review of George Palacios' *Manuel Zapata Olivella (1920-2004) Pensador político, radical y hereje de a diáspora Africana en las Américas* (Editorial Pontificia Bolivariana, 2020) illustrates that the author's reading of the well-studied and celebrated literary giant Manuel Zapata Olivella "makes a deep dive into all of the Zapata Olivella's best works and the criticism about them to bring to the fore his own "cartography"—borrowing from the author himself—of the development of Afro Colombian and Afro Latin American literature. Palacios' investigation is well-researched and clearly shows the process of "racialization," or "darkening," of Colombian letters that decidedly goes beyond the national rhetoric of Latin American mestizaje and settles comfortably among the literature of the African Diaspora with all of its textures and complexities."

In this volume of the journal, we include the creative works by Afro-Panamanian writers Melanie Taylor Herrera and Carlos Wynter Melo. The writings of Melanie Taylor Herrera (1972) reflect that she is an urban writer as she noted in a 2013 interview with PALARA co-editor Sonja S. Watson, "Soy una mujer urbana, hija de los logros del feminismo del siglo XX, afro y consciente de serlo, pero no circunscribo mi escritura a temas afros ni a temas de denuncia social ni siquiera a temas exclusivamente panameños" (Watson, "Entrevista a Melanie" 2013). Much like her literary contemporary Carlos Oriel Wynter Melo (1971), Taylor represents

a new generation of black writers in Panama: race is omnipresent and a part of their identity but does not restrict or limit the topics that they choose to engage in their literary works. Both have distinguished themselves initially as short story writers in Panama and Latin America. Taylor Herrera won the Rafaela Contreras short story prize in 2009, awarded by the Nicaraguan Association of Writers as well as the Sixth Continent International Short Story Award, (2011). In 2014, she won the Metro culture micro-story contest conducted by Radio Panama. She has been invited to literary events such as Centroamérica Cuenta (2014) and the International Congress of the Spanish Language (2016). In 2020, her short story collection *Los Cuarentinos* was included in an anthology by the University of Guadalajara, Mexico. Her most recent work is *Mujerona* (2021) (Zeta Centuria Editores), a book of poetry that relates feminine sexuality, poking around the senses through language.

Wynter Melo has also distinguished himself as a novelist. In 2017, his novel *Las impuras* (The Impure) was a finalist for the Association of Caribbean Writers Prize. His work has previously been recognized at the Guadalajara Book Fair, the Hay Festival, the Bogotá Cultural Secretary, the National Cultural Institute of Panama, UNESCO, and other organizations. His books include the works of fiction *Ojos para ver una invasión* (Piedra Santa 2015), *Mujeres que desaparecen* (URUK editores 2016), and *El escapista y otras reparaciones* (Panamericana 2007), and an essay collection entitled *Panamá. El dique, el agua y los papeles*. In the year 2021, the Latino Book Review magazine includes him among the six Panamanian and contemporary writers that must be read. Contemporary issues of the human experience in the current age unite Taylor's and Wynter Melo's narratives. The unnamed central protagonists that populate many of their narratives convey that they represent other figures that experience the same issues in a complex modern society.

We welcome your original essays for inclusion in PALARA 26 (2022), "Afro-Diasporic Protest: Black Women's Resistance in Cali and in the Black Pacific," which will be curated by guest co-editors Sarah Soanirina Ohmer (Lehman College), Aurora Vergara Figueroa (Universidad Icesi), and Melissa Gómez Hernández (Universidad Icesi). The co-editors encourage submissions on queer of color and/or Afro-Indigenous activists, critical scholars, and artists, and Black women or Black LGBTQ+ writers.

The Editors

Sonja S. Watson, Dean, AddRan College of Liberal Arts,
Professor of Spanish, Texas Christian University,

Dorothy E. Mosby, Interim Dean of Faculty and Vice President
for Academic Affairs; Mary E. Woolley, Professor of Spanish, Mount
Holyoke College

Socialismo mulato: Soviet Fascination with Race in Cuba

Damaris Puñales-Alpízar

Abstract

In the Soviet imaginary, the Cuban mulato represented not only an exotic other but also the realization of another kind of socialism, possible in other conditions and at other coordinates, (almost) far from Soviet reach. In general terms, Cubans came to fulfill a multilevel imaginary aspiration of Soviet identity related to Black and exploited people, Latin America, the United States, and the dissemination of the socialist ideology around the world. The Soviet fascination with, commitment to, and admiration for people of color was reinforced in this case by the added bonus that Cubans were comrades from a socialist island just a few miles from the US coast. At the geopolitical level, that fascination translated into the election of the first Black man to be sent into the cosmos; at an aesthetic level, it is related to a specific kind of poetry produced by Soviet authors in which the emphasis was on Cubans as mulatos, as this article will demonstrate through the analysis of literary works by authors such as Mayakovski, Yevtushenko, Kovaliov, Smolnikov, and Gamzatov. The third aspect of this fascination was made manifest in the many interracial marriages between Soviet women and Black Cuban men.

Keywords: race, socialist ideology, mulata Cuba, Black Cuban in the space.

THE FIRST BLACK IN THE COSMOS

The name José Armando López Falcón is nearly unknown to any Cuban today. It resonates in the memory of only a few people on the island. López Falcón was a Cuban cosmonaut, though he never actually went into space and his fame has been thoroughly eclipsed by his peers. If you ask Cubans of any generation about Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez, by contrast, most will recognize the name and his history. López Falcón and Tamayo Méndez were the two Cubans chosen to be part of Interkosmos, the Eastern bloc's early space program run by the former Soviet Union. Before Tamayo flew into the cosmos in 1980, they trained for two years. It was not until a couple of days before the launch of the space rocket that they learned which of them was going to leave Earth. (i)

When in September 1980 Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez took off as part of the Soyuz 38 mission from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, in what was then the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan, on a journey that would last almost eight days, he not only became the first Cuban and Latin American to

go out into interstellar space but was also the first person of African descent to become a cosmonaut. His name became part of History (yes, with a capital H), and he attained hero status both in Cuba and in the Socialist bloc (ii).

It was the Cold War era, and space was one of the rival countries' most important battlefields. Years earlier, the Soviet Union had decided to make its space program egalitarian and inclusive: in addition to sending the first man into space, the Soviets also sent the first woman (Valentina Tereshkova, in 1963) and the first Asian (Pham Tuan, in 1980). Besides its scientific scope, the program also had a robust geopolitical agenda. For instance, the first cosmonaut from a country other than the Soviet Union and the United States was the Czechoslovak pilot Vladimir Remek, son of a Czech mother and a Slovak father. His 1978 mission coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of the Soviet-backed Czechoslovak coup d'état in 1948 and the tenth anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 by Warsaw Pact troops. (iii)

Following the logic of this representativeness principle and geopolitical agenda maintained by the Soviets, we can speculate that Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez filled a quota by

being the first Afro-descendant cosmonaut in the space race. And one cannot help wondering, all these years later, what real impact his race had on the decision to choose him rather than José Armando López Falcón to be the Cuban representative who would accompany Yuri Romanenko.

Of course, for Cuba it was also important that its first man in space—the only one so far—be Black. This action promoted the government's agenda for racial equality undertaken since the beginning of the Revolution, especially at the level of political and propagandistic discourse. (iv)

This speculative exercise in approaching this topic does not in any way imply a desire to dismiss Tamayo Méndez's talents, abilities, and preparation to become a cosmonaut. It is merely a hypothesis about the geopolitical and ideological reasons that both the Soviet Union and Cuba had to choose him for the mission.

Tamayo and Romanenko became the faces on the posters and received all the media attention. Tamayo met all the requirements to become the program's and Cuba's "poster man": born into a poor Black family, as a child he had to work as a shoeshine boy, a job that was "eradicated" after the Cuban Revolution of 1959. In the late 1950s, he joined the Association of Young Rebels, the urban arm of the rebel army in the mountains. After the Revolution, he first studied in the Soviet Union to become an aviation technician and then trained to be a pilot.

After months of training as part of the Interkosmos program, which had begun in 1978, the two Cuban cosmonauts were paired with their Soviet counterparts. Tamayo Méndez joined Colonel Yuri Romanenko, who had previously flown on the Soyuz 26 mission to the Salyut 6 space station in December 1977; the mission had lasted ninety-six days and included a spacewalk of about ninety-minute by Romanenko. López Falcón was matched up with Colonel Yevgeny Jrunov, a research engineer who had flown on the Soyuz 5 to dock it with the Soyuz 4 in January 1969; he had also conducted a spacewalk.

According to Dumitru-Dorin Prunariu, the Romanian candidate who trained alongside Tamayo Méndez and López Falcón in the Interkosmos program, political factors influenced the selection of the cosmonaut who would fly:

Both candidates were very well trained, very well prepared, but Tamayo was the first Black person to be sent into space. That was a political challenge for Russia... for the Soviet Union in that time, to send him. He was well prepared, no doubt, but his Russian was pretty poor, compared to the other one [José Armando López Falcón]. (Burgess and Vis 134)

Romanenko said of Tamayo Méndez, "He is a very determined individual, but also very kind and has a sharp sense of humor. Of course, as a real Cuban, he is temperamental but is in good command of his emotions" (Burgess and Vis

134). What Romanenko meant with this description—"a real Cuban" and "temperamental"—is unknown, but it seems to contrast with what Yevgeny Jrunov said about his partner, José Armando López Falcón:

Me gusta la capacidad de José Armando de demostrar sangre fría en la más complicada situación. Durante las clases . . . ni se dio un caso en que él perdiera su dominio. Es más, reiteradamente observé: cuánto más se "caldea" a veces la situación, con tanta más tranquilidad actúa José Armando. Es su rasgo más valioso. ("Vuelo conjunto URSS-Cuba" 47)

The speech delivered by Fidel Castro on October 15, 1980, in the Palace of Conventions in Havana, to welcome and celebrate the return of the men that participated in the first Soviet-Cuban space flight, also offers some clues about his possible influence on the final cosmonaut selection. The Cuban leader said:

Con la Revolución las puertas se abrieron para él [referring to Tamayo Méndez] al igual que para toda nuestra juventud, al igual que para todo nuestro pueblo: la oportunidad de estudiar, la oportunidad de superarse, la oportunidad de servir a su pueblo.

Era una opción suya, como joven humilde, y se ha dicho y se ha repetido y se ha insistido, en su cuna humilde. Y es porque realmente constituye todo un símbolo el hecho de que nuestro primer cosmonauta, y el primer cosmonauta de América Latina y el primer cosmonauta de África, y no es un capricho que nosotros digamos que es también el primer cosmonauta de África, porque Tamayo, hombre eminentemente negro, que lleva también en su sangre la sangre del indio y la sangre española, es todo un símbolo de la sangre mezclada que en el crisol de la historia de nuestra patria dieron origen a nuestro pueblo; sangre africana, sangre india, sangre española. Por eso decimos que también simboliza a África, puesto que es el primer descendiente de africanos que ha viajado al espacio. Y es todo un símbolo que un hombre de origen tan humilde haya alcanzado tan extraordinario éxito, porque, desde luego, solo la Revolución y únicamente la Revolución, habría hecho posible que un joven como Tamayo tuviera esa posibilidad. (Castro)

Not once in the long speech is López Falcón mentioned. In contrast to Tamayo Méndez, and in addition to being White (whatever that means in the Cuban imagination), he was the son of a middle-class family. After the Revolution, his father worked for the ministry of the food industry, and his mother for the ministry of transport. Tamayo Méndez's transformation into a cosmonaut was thus presented as

another of the Revolution's successes, an overcoming of social inequality. Although Tamayo Méndez did not lack the merits to become a cosmonaut, his selection, and Fidel Castro's emphasis on his status as a Black boy from a low-income family who had managed to reach outer space thanks to the Revolution, still provides an interesting nuance to think about why he was the one selected to fly in the joint mission. One might also speculate that another reason for choosing Tamayo Méndez was his familial ties with Harry Antonio Villegas Tamayo, who fought beside Ernesto Guevara in the Sierra Maestra before 1959, in the Congo in 1965, and then in Bolivia in 1967. (v)

The racial issue also had an impact on the geopolitical relationship between Cuba and the Soviet Union: between 1975 and 1990, when Soviet-Cuban relations reached their peak, about 300,000 Cuban troops were dispatched to Africa to advance Soviet global interests. This deployment was a huge boost to Soviet aims because Cuban soldiers of African descent could pose as local African fighters and avoid calling attention to Soviet-Cuban intervention in the African wars. It is important to remember that at the Second Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) in July 1920, Lenin had argued that "all Communist parties must give active support to the revolutionary movements of liberation of the nationalist bourgeoisies of the colonies" (Matusevich 59). Years later and in another context, it was almost impossible for the Soviet Union to intervene in the African wars. But Cuba, which was leading the Non-Aligned Movement at the time, was in the best position to become the extension of the Soviet Union's fighting arm in Africa. (vi)

As part of their self-portrayal as a "racism-free paradise," during the first half of the twentieth century the Soviet Union welcomed many Black people—both famous personalities and regular citizens—especially from the United States. Most of the time, these people were received and given a special status: after all, most of them were Americans who were supposed to experience firsthand the moral "superiority" of socialism. Among the Black figures who traveled to the USSR was the Jamaican writer Claude McKay (in 1922). US poet Langston Hughes and US actors Paul Robeson and Lloyd Patterson were part of a group of twenty-one Black intellectuals and artists who moved to the Soviet Union in 1932 to take part in the film *Black and White*, commissioned by the Communist International. The project never materialized, but some of the artists decided to stay. In the years that followed, thousands of students from Africa also traveled to the Soviet Union.

One of the most famous and best-loved Soviet movies from the 1930s, *Circus*, a musical comedy directed by Grigori Aleksandrov, offers a racial counterpoint between the United States and the Soviet Union, presenting the latter as a "racism-free paradise": it is the story of a biracial family—a White American actress with a Black child—who visit the Soviet Union and find sympathy and friendship there. After

the movie, the child became a "symbol of Soviet internationalism and its struggle against racism" (Razor, vii).

But there were other portrayals of African people, not always with a positive effect. As Raquel Greene says:

In their depictions of Africa and people of African origin, Soviet children's writers frequently reinforced stereotypes that may ultimately have had, however unintentionally, a negative impact on how Soviets perceived people of African origin. One example from Soviet popular culture would be the song "Chunga Changa." Made popular by the animated film *Katerok [Boat]* (1970), "Chunga Changa" presents Africa as a land of exotic animals and carefree, banana-eating natives whose primitivism is idealized. But this presumably positive view of Africa has a clear, patronizing subtext. ("Constructions of Africa in Early Soviet Children's Literature")

CUBANS IN THE SOVIET UNION

After the Revolution of 1959, a large number of Cubans went to the former Soviet Union to complete their professional education and training. It is estimated that there were at least 300,000 in the thirty years that the exchange between the two countries lasted; the actual figure is unknown. Many of these students developed romantic relationships with people from the Soviet Union, mainly Cuban men and Soviet women. Several of those couples, moreover, were interracial. In a number of cases, these couples lived for some time in Cuba.

In 2006, Cuban filmmakers Gustavo Pérez and Oneyda González made a documentary entitled *Todas iban a ser reinas (They Were All Going to Be Queens)*, in which they interviewed several women of Soviet origin from various former Soviet republics. The only thing the women had in common was having followed their husbands to Cuba. They talked about how their lives were transformed once they arrived on the island. One statement is quite telling in terms of racial interaction and perception. Irina Pelaeza, from Latvia, described her husband thus:

un compañero exótico, con espendrum, con su piel bronceada (porque estábamos en julio), con la sonrisa espléndida esa de los cubanos, que me mató, me mató, me deslumbró. Me llegó acá y me mató para el resto de mi vida. Porque sonreír así solamente podían los cubanos. (00:02:15–00:02:33) (viii)

Despite the admiration and love that Irina's words transmit, they can also be read as an example of the exoticization with which Cubans, especially Blacks, were viewed in

the Soviet Union at the time. The Ukrainian film critic Zoia Barash, in an interview with Elizabeth Mirabal Llorens, said:

Pienso que los matrimonios mixtos entre soviéticas y cubanos tuvieron mucha importancia para el ambiente del país. Centenares de soviéticas que se casaron con mulatos y negros cubanos disolvieron un poco y a nivel personal cierto ambiente de prejuicios raciales. (Mirabal Llorens 51)

Barash, who passed away on October 26, 2014, lived in Cuba for more than 50 years, although she first arrived there to work as a translator, and later formed a family and stayed on the island for the rest of her life. (ix)

On this subject of mixed marriages between Soviets and Cubans, the statement made by Cuban writer José Miguel Sánchez (Yoss) is also noteworthy. Yoss participated, together with Zoia Barash and other intellectuals, in a colloquium in Havana on May 28, 2009, organized by the magazine *Temas*, to discuss culture, race, and identity in the context of Russian cultural traces in Cuba. In that forum, Yoss said:

Independientemente de cualquier acercamiento estatal u oficial que se preconizara, que se basara en cuestiones ideológicas, también existió un acercamiento personal mediado por el exotismo. Piensen en lo que era para un cubano, en 1959, una rubia de ojos azules; era un personaje de película yanqui; de pronto llegan las primeras rusas rubias de ojos azules que no solo no nos despreciaban, sino que les mostraron a los blancos cubanos que el negro también podía ser bonito y atractivo. Hubo y hay muchos estereotipos, es cierto . . . pero, independientemente de todas estas cuestiones, había un extraordinario interés hacia las diferencias. (58)

Although the exact number of how many interracial couples were formed between Cubans and Soviets is not known, the women interviewed in *Todas iban a ser reinas* attest to the existence of this phenomenon and are the tip of the iceberg of a much larger process in which Soviet love, admiration, and fascination for Cubans, but in particular for Black and mulato Cubans, became part of both countries' social reality.

On the other hand, it is interesting to read the recollections of former Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Anastas Mikoyan, when he talks about the first Cubans who went to the Soviet Union to learn a trade. He does not mention a generic Cuban, but specifies a hypothetical Juan, a Black Cuban who formed sentimental ties with a Soviet family in which he was welcomed, loved, and taken care of:

No dudamos de que después de tantos años, en algún poblado cubano, recuerde hoy el negro Juan, padre ya desde hace tiempo de una numerosa familia, a la “tía Katia,” que trabajaba de conserje en el centro del pueblo de cosacos del Kubán, e invitaba a su casa los domingos a estos muchachos de la lejana Cuba (“porque sus madres están tan lejos . . .”) para quererlos con su cálido corazón de madre que había perdido para siempre en la guerra a sus cuatro hijos . . . Y esto fue también un “hilo” de la firme amistad que estableció entre nosotros una base indestructible de relaciones mutuas. (Nabel Pérez 254) (x)

However, the Cubans were not the first or the only Blacks to arrive in the former USSR, as already mentioned. It is estimated that about sixty thousand students from Africa went to the Soviet Union between 1949 and 1991. Many of them also formed interracial couples. (xi)

In his article “An Exotic Subversive: Africa, Africans, and the Soviet Everyday,” Maxim Matusevich explores the special place that Africans played in the formulation of an early Soviet identity:

Having assumed power in 1917 and established the first socialist state in history, the Bolsheviks quickly positioned themselves as the natural allies of those oppressed by international capitalism . . . [A]cross the capitalist world, non-white people (whether in the colonies or in the diaspora) consistently represented the most exploited and the most discriminated-against segments of the population. For the Bolsheviks to embrace the peoples of colour wherever they might be was not a leap of faith but the logical extension of their most intrinsic beliefs. (59)

This cycle that started with an idea in 1917 came to fruition first with the arrival of African students to the Soviet Union, and then with the close relationship between Soviets and Cubans that also included Cuba's military intervention in Africa.

SOVIET POETRY AND CUBAN RACE

When Vladimir Mayakovski was in Havana on July 4, 1925, he must have felt a sense of strangeness around Black Cubans. What he saw shocked him enough to inspire his poem “Blek end uait” (so titled by Mayakovski, using the Cyrillic alphabet —Блек энд уайт— and then translated into English by Langston Hughes, with the help of Lidia Filatova, as “Black and White”). In this poem he narrates Black exploitation at the hands of White people. It was published in Russian and Spanish (translated by Angel Augier) in the bilingual anthology prepared by Augier, Nina Bulgakova, Eliseo Diego, and Alexei Smolnikov, titled

Москва-Гавана. Гавана-Москва. Стихи советских и кубинских поэтов / Moscú-La Habana, La Habana-Moscú. Poetas cubanos y soviéticos in 1977:

Pero grabó
 una cosa en su memoria,
 sólida,
 cual es la estatua
 de Maceo:
 “Tócale al blanco
 la piña madura,
 y la podrida
 solo alcanza el negro.
 El trabajo más blanco
 es para el blanco,
 y el trabajo más negro—
 para el negro...
 Si el azúcar
 blanco blanco
 ¿por qué
 tiene que hacerla
 el negro negro? (Augier 106-10)(xii)

It was not, however, the only Afro-Cuban poem by Mayakovski. In “Syphilis” (“Сифилис,” 1926), he describes a Black man who is quarantined in Havana’s harbor, forced to wait until “a wealthy white American from first-class, Swift, the syphilitic ‘pig king,’ disembarks” (Lee 70).

Mayakovski’s fixation on Black people is related to a Soviet identity in which the primary ideological goal was to liberate exploited communities throughout the world, as stated during the Second Congress of the Communist International. Another of Mayakovski’s poems (“To Our Youth,” 1927, “Нашему юношеству,” originally in Russian) reads:

If I were an elderly negro

I would learn Russian
 without being despondent or lazy
 just because Lenin spoke it. (Mayakovski 6-9)

But even before Mayakovski, Russian travelers who had visited Cuba were impressed by the island’s mulatez and natural beauty. At the beginning of 1850, poet and translator Aleksandr Gavrilovich Rotchev (1807-73) traveled to the Americas as part of his work with the Russian-American Company. In Cuba, he visited Havana and Matanzas. Rotchev describes what he saw on the streets of these cities: “Mire a esa criolla: —iqué pierna tan pequeña, tan esbelta! Mire a una negra de alguna casa rica: está vestida espléndidamente. Mire a una mulata: ella sabe que no asusta el color negro de su piel y canturrea: ‘Aunque soy morena, / no soy de olvidar.’” (Nabel Pérez 14) (xiii)

It was not only the exotic (to Russian eyes) Blackness of the Cuban people that captivated the admiration of Russian travelers, but also their bravery. During the nineteenth century there was substantial commercial trade between Cuba and Russia, and Russians were concerned about slavery on the island. Publications such as *Nedelya* (Week), *Delo* (Business), and *Budilnik* (Alarm clock) echoed such concerns. At the end of that century, three young Russian men, Pyotr Streltsov, Yevstafy Konstantinovich, and Nikolai Melentyev, returned to their motherland after taking part in Cuba’s second independence war (1895–98) against the Spanish army, under the command of Antonio Maceo. One of them, Streltsov, published an article titled “Two Months in the Island of Cuba” in the journal *Véstnik Evropei* (Bulletin of Europe) in which he described his experience fighting under Maceo, whom he called “the second Spartacus.” (xiv)

After the Revolution in 1959, the government aligned itself with the Soviet socialist bloc in 1961, and the exchange between the two countries intensified exponentially. Some of this growth was evident in the constant trips that poets made from one nation to the other to “discover” their shared realities, and then to communicate to their compatriots what they had discovered. (xv)

As part of the intensification in the relationship between the two countries, many Cuban artists visited the former Soviet Union, where they were well received. Perhaps the best-known Cuban writer in the Soviet Union was Nicolás Guillén, who had been familiar to the Soviets well before 1959. Of Guillén’s literary work, Ilyá Ehrenburg, one of Guillén’s foremost translators into the Russian language, said in his 1966 book *Gentes, años, vida*:

Sus poemas son extraordinariamente musicales. Están relacionados con las canciones de los negros y mulatos cubanos. Él los lee muy bien; puede tocar una

melodía golpeando con los dedos sus grandes y brillantes dientes blancos (Nabel Pérez 155)

According to Ehrenburg, Guillén was admired not only because of the quality of his poetry but also because his poems reflected mulata Cuba.

In addition to Guillén, other artists who represented Cuban culture's African roots were invited to present their works in the Soviet Union. It seems that for the Soviet people, Blackness and mulatez were synonyms of Cubanness. This phenomenon helps explain the success of many Cuban artists invited to present in the Soviet Union, such as the painters Wifredo Lam, whose first exhibit was in 1946; Manuel Mendive, whose primitivist paintings were part of the exhibition of Cuban art in Moscow in 1981; and René Portocarrero, among many others.

A very well-known poet in Cuba and Latin America, and one of the most prolific translators of Cuban poetry into Russian, Pavel Grushko, also had a similar vision of a mulata Cuba. In a poem dedicated to Portocarrero, "René Portocarrero y su ciudad" ("Рене Портокарреро -город и человек," originally in Russian, translated by Eliseo Diego), the poetic voice talks of a mulata city:

Mi ciudad vigilante,

mi maestra de vida,

isi fue fácil quererte, mi mulata briosa! (Augier 178)
(xvi)

Mayakovski's "Black and White" was the inspiration, many years after its publication, for another Soviet poet, Nicolai Starshinov who in his poem "Esta desgracia, este dolor palpable" ("Эту боль, это горе," originally in Russian, translated by David Chericían) refers to Mayakovski's poem but clarifies that Cuba was already experiencing a brilliant day, and white teeth were shining amid the black beards.

Desde entonces vivían en mi recuerdo

la ira del poeta y el dolor,

el rey de ultramar, gordo como un cerdo,

pegando al negro Willy en su color.

...

He aquí que en Cuba el alba ya despunta,

¿no escuchas como cantan los cubanos?

Brillan los blancos dientes enmarcados

en las barbas de sólida negrura . . . (Augier 156-157)

Other Soviet artists and intellectuals were interested as well in the African roots of Cuban culture. For instance, Soviet Armenian musician Yuri Kazarián, while visiting Cuba in 1988, declared, "Traté de comprender el alma del arte-afrocubano, su ritmo" (Nabel Pérez 463).

Other poets were more explicit about their fascination with the issue of race in Cuba. For instance, Rasul Gamzatov, in his poem "La mulata," ("Мулатка," originally in Russian, translated by David Chericían) focuses the poetic emotion on the skin color of the woman he is contemplating:

Otra vez, inmadura una mitad

la luna apareció sobre la isla,

y como un solitario barco blanco

por el cielo callada se desliza.

Crujía la noche como seda negra,

y su rostro africano entonces vi

en Santiago, de pronto, sobre piedras

amarillas alzarse frente a mí.

Un riachuelo arabescos enlazaba

no lejos, respirando en su rumor

libertad, parecía la batuta

de un invisible director.

Dos mulatas cantaban, en las frases

de su canción chispeaban brasas puras,

de los labios calientes que llameaban

apenas se veían las comisuras.

. . .

Eran esas palabras como enigmas,

pero para mi oído nada más.

Ay, mulatas, ¿de dónde las sacaron?

¿De quién las aprendieron a cantar?

¿Quizás, audaz y trémula,
 junto al anillo del Caribe acuático,
 así la madre negra les cantaba
 sobre el padre de rostro blanco?
 ¿O quizá en la alta mar el padre negro
 bajo la luna,
 la canción cantaba
 sobre aquella mujer de blanco rostro
 que era su esposa amada?
 Del padre y de la madre son los sones,
 son los rasgos del padre y de la madre
 que abrieron su camino a ser las reinas
 de la belleza de los carnavales.
 Oh Cuba, Cuba, mulata orgullosa,
 enloquecí por ti, por tu canción,
 eres la reina, eres un soldado
 y eres tú misma la revolución.
 Yo también hace tiempo que a mi vida
 me acostumbré a considerar mulata,
 cuya madre alza siempre la faz negra
 y tiene el padre siempre la tez blanca.
 Y también es mulata mi canción (Augier 113-14)

We have transcribed the poem at length because it epitomizes a complicated poetic Soviet fascination with race in Cuba. The poetic voice is evidently mesmerized by the black color of the woman's skin described and by the fire that emanates from her songs. At the end of the poem, there is a fundamental semantic twist: whereas the admiration is initially focused on two singing Black women, in the end there is only one woman, a mulata, the daughter of a Black mother and a White father. Although it is not mentioned directly, an obvious reference to slavery can be identified:

the White man, master; the Black woman, enslaved. And that mulata woman becomes a soldier in the Cuban Revolution. This abrupt break at the semantic level could be related to the Soviets' complex dual fascination with Cuba: on the one hand, the Black or mulata woman served as the repository of a sensual and erotic meaning, in keeping with the way the Cuban woman has so often been presented, especially the Black or mulata —as a sexual object. On the other hand, the Revolution symbolized hope and the possibility of expanding the socialist legacy to other parts of the world, as well as a revitalization of a stagnant and outdated Soviet socialism, led at that time by a nomenklatura composed mainly of narrow-minded elderly men. The process of transforming idealized women as objects of desire and fascination (at the beginning of the poem) into admired figures with their own agency is ultimately imperfect and speaks, perhaps, to a Soviet inability to understand Cuban culture and identity. Nevertheless, the personification of the Revolution and its depiction as a mulata woman is reinforced by the title of the poem, which refers only to a single mulata, and not to two, the singers at the beginning of the poetic composition. Gamzatov's poem seems anachronistic, formally linked much more closely to the Black Poetry of the early twentieth century in Cuba than to the politically committed poetry of the Sixties.

Alexei Smolnikov, in his poem "Zafra," ("Зафра," originally in Russian, translated by David Chericían) is also mesmerized both by Cuba's multichromatic identity and by the Revolution:

Cuba, dura y salada es tu azúcar famosa,
 en las mejillas ásperas negro es tu sudor.
 Pero es dentiblanca tu sonrisa radiosa

y a conciencia se hace tu constante labor. (Augier 154-55)

Meanwhile, Dmitri Kovaliov, in his poem "Eco" ("Эхо," in Russian, also translated by David Chericían), alludes to the relationship between Cuba and Africa:

El eco de nuestro Aurora Báltico por todo el mundova.

¡Salud, África! ¡Salud,
 lejana Cuba, salud!

¡Cuán cercano vuestro ímpetu profundo! (Augier 125)

One of the most emblematic Soviet poets of all time, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, spent long periods in Cuba and even devoted an entire section of one of his poetry collections to his impressions of the island. In the twenty-one poems in the second part of *Ternura. Nuevos versos* (НЕЖНОСТЬ. НОВЫЕ СТИХИ, 1962), Yevtushenko is fascinated not so much with racial issues but primarily with Fidel Castro. Although the poet rarely wrote about women and romantic love, there are some instances in this part of the book in which he is seduced by the multichromatic hues of Cuban reality. For example, he compares the Cuban Revolution to a mulata woman, almost in the same way that Gamzatov did so at the end of his poem “La mulata.” (xvii)

More interesting in this regard is Yevtushenko’s work in the movie *I Am Cuba*. Allegorically speaking, in the film Cuba is presented as a mulata woman who is raped and abused by capitalism. One of the most allegorical characters, María, needs to be saved; in this sense, the film follows the same logic consistently presented since 1920: the Soviet Union was obliged to protect and rescue exploited people around the world, denying them or minimizing their own capacity for agency. María loves René, a fruit vendor who helps distribute clandestine pamphlets to students, but she is forced to be a prostitute at night, named Betty, and to renounce her Cuban lover. The end of the film portraying the triumph of the rebels who were fighting against Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorship, suggests that María will be able to end her double and precarious life. In this sense, the defeat of the capitalist system, as presented in the movie, seems to vindicate her:

La narrativa cinematográfica del filme busca construir una metáfora de la isla y de su historia, según la cual Cuba y la Revolución serían equivalentes. O dicho de otro modo: el único destino posible para la isla era la Revolución, pero no cualquier revolución, sino esa que tuvo lugar. El filme se convirtió así en una producción simbólica que habría servido a su director y realizadores para satisfacer su necesidad de darle forma al imaginario soviético sobre la Revolución Cubana y justificar, en cierto modo, la fascinación que en los primeros años después de la llegada de los barbudos al poder sentía la cúpula gobernante del politburó soviético hacia aquellos jóvenes que desafiaban al imperio norteamericano a pocas millas de sus costas. (Puñales-Alpízar 483)

In this sense, there is a striking similarity between the idea of presenting Cuba and the Revolution as one and the same—as has always been the government’s position—seen in the overlapping of a mulata woman and the Revolution, and the idea portrayed by Yevtushenko in one of his poems, which presents the Revolution as a woman to be loved. However, the poet does not focus on any particular trait of this woman other than her bravery.

Given his popularity, Yevtushenko had become a sort of cultural and ideological Soviet ambassador, while being perceived as a “soft dissident” among many in the Soviet Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (politburo). In 1963, for instance, Yevtushenko was invited by the poet and Senegalese president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, to the first Festival of Negro Arts. Senghor, who had his differences with Soviet socialism, thought that by making such a gesture, he would defy the Soviet regime, since Yevtushenko was invited as a Russian poet, not as an official representative of the Soviet government. In Dakar, however, “Evtushenko publicly defended his country’s ideology and international policies” (Katsakioris 152). Yevtushenko was fascinated with Africa at a variety of levels: (xx)

On the margins of the official exchanges Africa became for Evtushenko a source of poetic inspiration, a land of mysterious beauty, exotic and strange, yet akin to his own mysterious country. As one scholar suggests, Evtushenko’s verses lauding African freedom and the empathy of the Russian taiga for the African savannah were hardly empty of political meaning. Written in 1962 among expectations and struggle for a freer post-Stalinist Soviet country, they hid the message of liberalization within an exaltation of African liberation. His ideologically ambiguous tribute to African freedom bore no resemblance to the typical representations of Third World people’s struggle in Soviet public discourse. (152)

Although Yevtushenko did not directly address Black or mulata Cuba, it can be stated that his fascination with Africa had not only aesthetic reasons but was also related to the subjectivity developed since the 1920 Second Congress of the Communist International regarding the Soviet Union’s ideological commitment to liberating exploited and marginalized people across the rest of the world.

CONCLUSION

When Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez left Earth’s orbit, he became the first person of African descent to enter outer space. Not to mention the first Cuban, the first citizen from Latin America, and the first from a Third World country. Moreover, he became the visible face of an ideological apparatus eager to show off the advantage enjoyed by the socialist system in the space race. In that sense, Tamayo became a multilayered signifier who fulfilled several quotas at once, and just as important as those quotas, he was a lowborn boy from a country located just 90 miles from the United States coast.

Besides the geopolitical import, at the suprapolitical level, of his being chosen to be sent into space, by the time he traveled with Romanenko aboard Soyuz 38 in 1980, the

Soviet people had been in love with Cuba for two decades. While part of that love was manifested in the politically committed Soviet poetry from those decades, it was also evident in the Soviet fascination with the Cuban people and its mulata status.

In the Soviet imaginary, the Cuban mulato represented not only an exotic and different other but also the realization of another socialism, one possible in other conditions and other coordinates, (almost) far from Soviet reach. In general terms, Cubans fulfilled a diversified aspirational fantasy of Soviet identity concerning Black and exploited people, Latin America, the United States, and the triumph of the socialist ideology in other parts of the world. The Soviet fascination with, commitment to, and admiration for people of color had the added bonus that, in this case, Cubans were comrades from a socialist island right next door to the USSR's greatest global antagonist.

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Opposing Worldviews: A New Perspective on Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s Failure in the Congo

Amy J. King

Todos los hombres libres del mundo deben aprestarse a vengar el crimen del Congo. Ernesto Guevara¹

INTRODUCTION

This article serves two purposes: 1) to reexamine Western portrayals of African and Hispanic history, and 2) to depict Che Guevara’s failure in the Congo through a more inclusive scope of cultural misunderstanding. Guevara’s experience in the Congo is often overshadowed by his success in Cuba and even his death in Bolivia. His revolution to liberate the oppressed Congolese from imperialist intervention has been a source of inquiry for many historians during the past five decades. Many scholars attribute his defeat to a variety of political and economic factors including, but not limited to, regionalism in the Congo, conflict between Congolese and Cuban rebel forces, insufficient resources, and a lack of a unified vision. Even though these aspects clearly played a critical role, this essay will theorize that opposing worldviews of Cuban revolutionary and local forces were the pivotal factor leading to divisiveness among the rebel forces in the Congo during the 1960s and Guevara’s ultimate failure in Africa.

HISTORY OF THE CONGO

To understand Che’s motives for inserting himself and his communist revolution in Africa, it is crucial to contextualize the history and the political climate in the Congo. What is now referred to as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or the DRC, has been recognized by several names in the past. The Kingdom of the Kongo was named the Congo Free State, after being designated as King Leopold II of Belgium’s private property. The Congo Free State “was a Belgian colony for many years, during which time its mineral wealth was controlled by Belgian, British, and American consortia” (Villafaña 3). At the turn of the twentieth century, Belgium annexed the country as one of its colonies, renaming the territory the Belgian Congo. Belgian colonial rule was brutal and cruel. As a result, “Anticolonial nationalism rapidly developed in the 1950s, challenging the colonial order [...] the critical episodes that so shook a once-invincible colonial

administration [...] were the leaderless, spontaneous convulsion of the January 1959 Kinshasa (Leopoldville) riots and the spread of civil disobedience in such key regions as Lower Congo, Kwilu, and Maniema” (Clark 14).

On June 30, 1960, the Congo won its independence from Belgium. During this period the country became known as the Republic of the Congo-Leopoldville (not to be confused with the neighboring French colony, the Republic of the Congo-Brazzaville). In *Cold War in the Congo*, author Frank R. Villafaña relates that the “political situation in Congo immediately after independence was certainly in disarray, but with Lumumba’s election win and his appointment as Prime Minister, it looked as if circumstances would improve. Lumumba’s assassination, six months later, instantly turned disarray into chaos” (17).

Several short-term governments sprang up and died down before Joseph Mobutu, whom Lumumba had appointed chief of staff of the Congolese army, successfully instigated a coup. At the time there was speculation of the United States’ and Belgium’s involvement in Mobutu’s rise to power, especially considering the new leader’s stance of anti-communism during the Cold War, which was confirmed once more at the turn of the century when the Belgian Parliament declared its country responsible for Lumumba’s execution. During the political chaos in the Congo in the early 1960s, there was an epidemic of progressive rebellions mainly in the central and eastern areas of the country. One of these rebellions to the north, led by Nicolas Olenga, captured Stanleyville-Kisangani and established the progressive People’s Republic of the Congo (Gott xvi).

With the Cold War well under way, the United States perceived these rebellions as a threat to democracy and sent delegates, troops, weapons, and financial support to aid in Kasavubu and Tshombe’s struggle against communism. The U.S. also initiated several undercover operations during this time, attempting to stomp out communism in Africa. Several African countries, such as Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Tanzania, and Zanzibar, came to the aid of the rebel forces, also referred to as the “Lumumbist left” and

“expressed their opposition to what looked like the re-imposition of colonial rule in the Congo - with Tshombe as a black puppet leader” (xviii-ix). Therefore, when Algeria reminded Cuba of their help in its (failed) 1962 guerrilla movement in Argentina, Cuba responded by offering reciprocal assistance to their allies in the Congo.

CHE’S INVOLVEMENT IN THE CONGO

This is the chaotic and hostile political climate that the Congo was experiencing when Ernesto “Che” Guevara, with Cuban support, decided to take his communist revolution to Africa. Guevara’s political and economic agenda should not be analyzed separately from his personal history, for the latter greatly influenced the former. Ernesto “Che” Guevara was born in Buenos Aires in 1928. He studied medicine taking multiple leaves from the university to travel throughout Latin America. He later joined the revolutionary cause in Cuba led by Fidel Castro in 1955. In 1965 Guevara took his guerrilla revolution to the Congo, which resulted in irreparable failure. After a period of recuperation and reflection in Prague during 1966, Guevara decided that Bolivia was the next appropriate country to begin his continental revolution. His time in Bolivia served as proof of his total dedication to the revolutionary way of life and also marked its brutal end; Guevara was executed on October 9, 1967 by the Bolivian army with the support of the United States CIA.²

Guevara’s experiences throughout Latin America and in Africa greatly shaped his communist revolutionary ideology. Witnessing the impoverished populations’ living conditions in several different countries due to oppression from capitalist and imperialist nations solidified Guevara’s beliefs and pushed him into the global political spotlight. The most significant event being the United States’ involvement in overthrowing the progressive Guatemalan government of Jacobo Arbenz in the year 1954, through which he developed an “implacable hatred of the United States” and imperialist nations alike (Gott xii). Guevara’s “concern for the poor and his later belief that their lot could be improved through violent revolution, fueled his actions for the rest of his life” (xi-ii). In the 1964 United Nations General Assembly in New York, Guevara gave an impassioned speech on the matter, claiming:

Quería referirme específicamente al doloroso caso del Congo, único en la historia del mundo moderno, que muestra cómo se pueden burlar con la más absoluta impunidad, con el cinismo más insolente, el derecho de los pueblos. Las ingentes riquezas que tiene el Congo y que las naciones imperialistas quieren mantener bajo su control son los motivos directos de todo esto. En la intervención que hubiera de hacer, a raíz de su primera visita a las Naciones Unidas, el compañero Fidel Castro advertía que todo el problema de la coexistencia entre las naciones se reducía al problema de la

apropiación indebida de riquezas ajenas, y hacía la advocación siguiente: «cese la filosofía del despojo y cesará la filosofía de la guerra.» Pero la filosofía del despojo no sólo no ha cesado, sino que se mantiene más fuerte que nunca y, por eso, los mismos que utilizaron el nombre de las Naciones Unidas para perpetrar el asesinato de Lumumba, hoy, en nombre de la defensa de la raza blanca, asesinan a millares de congoleños. (“Patria”)

In this famous “Patria o muerte” speech, given before his involvement in the Congo, Guevara illuminates many of the global injustices that were being caused and sustained by imperialist nations around the world. He continues by calling into question the role of the United Nations, the United States, and Belgium in Congolese affairs. He challenges Tshombe’s leadership and alleges that Belgium’s actions in the Congo are comparable to Hitler’s actions in Belgium just two short decades earlier. Che adhered to “a new Marxist humanism” and argued that “genuine Marxism does not exclude humanism: it incorporates it” (Löwy 6). Guevara himself stressed the importance of “a Marxist, socialist system which is coherent, or nearly so, in which man is placed at the center, and in which the individual, the human personality, with the importance it holds as an essential factor in the revolution, is taken into account” (Guevara “Il piano”). For this reason, Guevara felt the need to extend his revolution to Africa, more specifically to the Congo.

Months prior to the launch of his campaign in the Congo, Guevara travelled throughout Africa meeting with several politicians and diplomats. According to Paco Ignacio Taibo II, “el Che se desplazó a toda velocidad por el continente, entablando relaciones con los nuevos líderes progresistas, discutiendo con dirigentes de los grupos de liberación, hablando con estudiantes y periodistas [...] saltando de aeropuerto en aeropuerto, manteniendo conversaciones con los presidentes de los países claves en el movimiento anticolonial” albeit Guevara himself claimed that “no estaba nada decidido” (577, 601). During this time, Guevara was exposed to a more authentic African experience. Even though he may not have decided to bring the revolution to the Congo in that very moment, Cuba’s plan for intervention was already underway.

When Guevara finally arrived in April of 1965 with the idea of continuing the anti-imperialist revolution in the Congo, he entered the continent using the name Ramón Benítez, and was later referred to by his *nom de guerre*, Tatu. Che and his men, along with four other rounds of troops that would be sent from Cuba by the end of April, began training in the Congolese territory west of Lake Tanganyika. They ambushed the roads between the towns of Bendersa and Albertville controlled by Captain Hoare, who was loyal to Mobutu (the head of the Congolese army), and his white mercenaries from southern Africa. The Cubans’ small military feats were detached from any major political

advances and Kasavubu (the president) and Tshombe (the prime minister) maintained control of the country.

Che Guevara and the Cuban forces were only in the Congo for nine months, the first couple of months were spent waiting for troops and training them upon arrival. In November of 1965, Guevara abandoned the revolutionary cause and retreated to Havana (after a temporary stay in Prague) with what remained of his troops. His retreat was spurred by Kasavubu dismissing Tshombe from his position as prime minister and replacing him with Kimba, with whom the Organisation of African Unity was less opposed. This change in leadership would later sabotage Che's support in Africa, leading to a compromise between Kasavubu and the Congolese rebel forces' leadership. With no internal African support, Fidel Castro's public denouncement of Guevara, and China's unwillingness to intercede, Che made the call to withdraw his troops and his revolution from Africa. This defeat defined the rest of Guevara's political career, and as Agustín Monzón reveals in his article "El Che Guevara murió en el Congo," the adventure of Che in the Congo is "[u]n fracaso que determinaría de forma casi irremisible sus siguientes pasos hasta su trágico final, casi dos años después, en las estribaciones de los Andes."

REASONS FOR FAILURE

Written after his withdrawal from Africa, during a period of reflection and retrospect, Guevara begins his *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria: Congo* by stating, "Esta es la historia de un fracaso." Why were the Cuban forces unable to promote lasting political change in the Congo, but later successfully helped construct the Guinean State and secure Namibia's independence? How is it that Che, who played a critical role in the success of the Cuban Revolution, could fail so terribly in the Congo? Many scholars attribute his defeat to a variety of political and economic factors including, but not limited to, regionalism in the Congo, conflict within the rebel forces, insufficient resources, and a lack of a unified vision. These factors affected every level of the revolution in the Congo, starting from the bottom up.

Cuban Troops

A documentary released in 1997 interviewed the surviving Cuban soldiers who fought alongside Guevara in the Congo. One of his fellow soldiers reveals the Cubans' attitude towards Che upon reminiscing:

La orden era [...] comer donde come él, dormir donde duerme él y morir donde muere él. Bueno, a mí eso me caía mal, ¿no? Porque el primer día cuando yo fui a coordinar con Tatu sobre las horas de clase, a mí me cayó mal por la forma penetrante de mirar a un tipo...

eh... con una mirada tipo irónico. Esa cosa, y me cayó mal. Bueno... soportar ese blanco...³ ("Tatu" 00:15:23-50)

This video highlights the internal relations between Guevara and the Cuban troops. From the beginning, there was division at the most basic level. It is important to keep in mind that the first forces sent to the Congo consisted solely of black Cubans as to not draw suspicion. However, this plan backfired by casting Guevara as an outsider within his closest, most loyal group of soldiers. Nonetheless, the Cubans faced another issue that was far more fundamental. Not only were they wary of their leader, but they also lacked faith in the success of their mission. The select group of Cuban soldiers began their training months prior back in Cuba, not knowing where they would be sent. When they set off for the Congo, by way of Tanzania, they were still unaware of who would lead them in their operation. The Cuban soldiers were constantly in the dark and completely unprepared for the Congolese terrain that they were to maneuver. The troops' doubt is made clear when Guevara explains, "En la reunión de partido insistí una vez más en la necesidad de que me apoyaran para crear un ejército disciplinado, un ejército ejemplo. Pregunté a los presentes quiénes creían en la posibilidad del triunfo y solo levantaron la mano de Moja y Mbili y los dos médicos llegados últimamente" (Pasajes 176). The Cuban forces lacked preparation, motivation, and confidence.

In his article, Agustín Monzón questions Guevara's true motives for inserting himself and the Cuban forces in the Congo when he insists that "La lucha en África era la vía de escape de un hombre que, tras contribuir decisivamente a la victoria de la Revolución en Cuba, había sentido la frustración del fracaso en su tarea como ministro de Industria en el nuevo régimen de Fidel Castro, que fue desechando una a una sus principales tesis políticas." Although many believe the rather romantic notion that Guevara became involved in the Congo for the betterment of humanity and to sever the imperialist ties of an oppressed nation, Monzón points out another valid motive: Guevara's political presence in Cuba would forever be limited under Fidel Castro's rule. Africa offered Guevara a fresh start at another revolution with less oversight. Nevertheless, Cuban troops' internal issues and that of their leader were only one factor leading to their inevitable failure.

Congolese Forces

On the other hand, the Congolese forces experienced even greater division among themselves. While planning the revolution in the Congo, Che "había subestimado la importancia de las fracturas tribales en territorio africano" (Monzón). The rebel forces in the Congo were already divided before Cuba's arrival. A variety of leaders and tribes controlled the lands in the center of the country as well as in the east. Not only did Guevara find difficulty in melding

Cuban and Congolese soldiers, but more importantly he was unable to unify the local rebel forces that were already fighting and securing territory in the Congo. Guevara's perceived whiteness was also an issue for the Congolese troops. Although one of his soldiers denies any racial prejudices on behalf of the revolutionary's leadership, he ironically reveals how the enemy was able to divide the troops by discrediting Guevara's personality solely based on the color of his skin. The soldier states, "Había negros en su contingente y no es posible que él sea racista con otros negros, solamente, porque eran congolese. Son las típicas historias utilizadas con el fin de desacreditar... a un movimiento, a una personalidad. Siempre recurren a este tipo de estrategia"⁴ ("Tatu" 00:28:06-29). Although his Cuban soldiers claim that these accusations were false, they clearly contributed to the Congolese impression of Guevara and spurred mistrust among the rebel forces.

There was also a rift between Cuban troops and Congolese forces. Guevara himself expressed that "Lo fundamental era lograr la unidad entre congolese y cubanos, tarea difícil" (Pasajes 177). The unification of Cuban and Congolese forces never came to fruition and neither did their revolution. Instead of fighting the Congolese government and their imperialist counterparts together, the revolution was spread too thin throughout the country. Not only was the revolution fighting the enemy on too many fronts, but it was also fighting against itself.

Leadership

Guevara's failure in the Congo has also been attributed to problems within the leadership of both the Cuban and the Congolese revolutionary forces. When Che entered eastern Congo in April of 1965, Congolese rebel leadership was unaware of his arrival. In "El Che en el Congo: 'La historia de un fracaso,'" Marc Jourdir reveals how "Por motivos de seguridad, el Che Guevara no había develado a los dirigentes de la revolución que formaría parte del destacamento enviado por Cuba. Una vez en el Congo, avisa a Kabila, con quien había hablado unos meses antes en Brazzaville durante una gira africana, para que venga a verlo." Guevara's presence in the Congo was unknown to rebel leaders and by not informing them of his arrival he denied them the opportunity to organize the rebel forces in advance. Two months passed before Kabila and Guevara met face to face. In his memoirs of the Congo, Che reveals how his relationship with Kabila gradually unraveled. He depicts Kabila as less than committed to the revolutionary cause and makes references to his drinking habits (Pasajes 86-7). Disagreement and lack of communication between Guevara and Kabila stalled the revolution's progress and permitted the enemy enough time to learn of Guevara's presence in the country, allowing them to reevaluate their plans and modify their tactics.

There were also disputes among the rebel forces and "their leaders, including Kabila, [who] were regarded as strangers - or more pejoratively still as 'tourists'" (Seddon). Few Congolese leaders had any contact with the local tribes before Lumumba's unconstitutional dismissal from office, which led them to take up arms against the local government. The sudden appearance of such leaders, like Kabila, were viewed skeptically by the local Congolese troops.

Support

Many odds did not favor the revolution in the Congo. Other examples include the Congolese government's abundance of Western support, the rebels' lack of external allies, language barriers, and the Organisation of African Unity's willingness to compromise. Interestingly, it was Fidel Castro publicizing Che's farewell letter in October of 1965 that alienated Guevara from his most loyal supporter and led him to withdraw his troops the following month. In the letter, Guevara states:

I formally renounce my posts in the leadership of the Party, my post as Minister, my rank as Major, my status as a Cuban citizen. Nothing legal binds me to Cuba, only ties of another kind that cannot be broken, as can official appointments [...] I can do what is forbidden to you because of your responsibility to Cuba, and the time has come for us to separate [...] I say once more that I free Cuba of any responsibility. ("Farewell")

Guevara wrote this letter to Castro in April of 1965, severing political ties with Cuba. However, he was upset that it had been disclosed to the public so readily. In a revolution that Guevara estimated would take five years to achieve, he was morally defeated when Castro published his letter after a mere six months. Che suddenly found himself in a chaotic revolution without the support of his close friend and advocate.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Historians have theorized the numerous factors that led to Guevara's withdrawal from the Congo. This paper asserts that these factors can be simplified by arguing that Che's vision for the Congo failed due to a difference in worldviews. As Karanja Keita Carroll explains in his article "Africana Studies and Research Methodology: Revisiting the Centrality of the Afrikan Worldview," the fundamental difference among cultures around the globe is the way they view the world. According to Keita Carroll, "the Afrikan worldview refers to a universal orientation and interpretive reference point that Afrikan people share" and clarifies that this "should not suggest a static means of interpretation

across the Afrikan world, however it does suggest that there are common interpretive processes that Afrikans utilize in their attempts at understanding a given phenomenon, and thus reality” (6). Keita Carroll elaborates upon the work of Vernon J. Dixon who distinguishes the African-oriented versus the Euro-American-oriented worldviews. Although Dixon places the ideology, axiology, ontology, and epistemology of these two worldviews in direct opposition, it is not unusual to see traces of Euro-American-oriented worldviews in African-oriented worldviews and vice versa. Differing worldviews may still share similar philosophies. Shared philosophies and characteristics do not undermine worldviews, but instead make them more diverse and inclusive.

National identity theories are often linked to ideas of race. Throughout Latin American history, we observe a shift from beliefs such as *las castas* (castes) to *mestizaje* (miscegenation) to *multiculturalismo* (multiculturalism) in the 1980s. These theories of racial purity, social hierarchy, and ethnic pluralism have been used to define national identities in Latin America from colonialism to present day. Similarly, several theories emerged surrounding ethnic and national identities in Africa. Philosophies including Négritude, Pan-Africanism, Afrocentrism, and Afropolitanism originated during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Balakrishnan “Afropolitanism” 575-76). On both continents we witness a gradual conceptual shift regarding national identity, from colonial nationalism, to nativism, to (most recently) racial multiplicity and, in some cases, identities separate from race. Specifically, the Afropolitan approach incorporates the coexistence of differing ethnicities through tolerance. Afropolitanism is the belief that these differences and interactions are the common glue that holds the African continent together (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 31). Although Afropolitanism has been criticized for “shifting away from a race-based epistemology... to engage in universalist non-racial thought from an African perspective,” Mbembe argues that it is possible to recognize the deep, rooted impact of colonialism, slavery, and African diaspora while also focusing on “the paradigm of itinerancy, mobility, and displacement” that forges a common cultural bond among those who consider themselves African (Balakrishnan, “The Afropolitan Idea” 7, 58). According to Mbembe, Africanness is not defined solely through opposition, cultural purity, or the role in Africa around the world; it is also defined by the presence and imprint of the rest of the world’s history on the African continent:

Our way of belonging to the world, of being in the world and inhabiting it, has always been marked by if not cultural mixing, then at least the interweaving of worlds, in a slow and sometimes incoherent dance with forms and signs that we have not been able to choose freely but which we have succeeded, as best we can, in domesticating and putting at our disposal. (59)

So, how then are we to discuss differing worldviews and cultural and ethnic pluralism without falling into the temptation of dichotomies as Mbembe suggests? And how does this relate to Guevara’s experiences in the Congo? This paper relies on the interplay between these two theories, Afropolitanism and the Afrikan Worldview. They complement each other, filling in what the other lacks. Afropolitanism broadens the tendency towards dichotomy often noted in the Afrikan Worldview theory. In contrast, the African Worldviews authenticate African cultural capital, which Afropolitanism is often criticized for undervaluing.

Theories on race and diaspora are complex and are under constant scrutiny and modification; for this reason, I will attempt to avoid oversimplification. Che Guevara’s worldview cannot accurately be described as solely “European-oriented.” His role in Africa is distinct from that of the colonizers and imperial powers; it is more complex. We cannot contain his role inside a tidy box and label it with just one theory. Nonetheless, we must confront these differences in worldviews.

Opposing Worldviews

The previously mentioned reasons for Guevara’s unsuccessful revolution do not provide the full narrative of Guevara’s time in the Congo. My objective is to unify these reasons, expand upon them, and fill in the gaps. Analyzing opposing worldviews is key to presenting a more holistic version of these events. To do so, I will rely on the theory of Afropolitanism and Afrikan Worldviews for two reasons. First, we must deploy Afropolitanism in this case because there is not just one African worldview. Borrowing the plurality of Africanness from the Afropolitan theory, all worldviews held by those who have ties to African experiences are valid and can be considered “African.” Second, while contrasting worldviews we must remember that Guevara’s revolution in the Congo is both an African and Hispanic phenomenon. These dual perspectives have yet to be analyzed authentically. Past research tends to portray Guevara’s time in the Congo from Western perspectives, which does appropriately situate this event in world history.

Both the local Congolese troops’ and the Cuban forces’ worldviews affected the outcome of this event. Rather than pointing out Cuban or Congolese shortcomings, we should analyze the relationship between these two parties through the lens of Afropolitan (or, inclusive and diverse) worldviews. In the case of Che in the Congo, a disconnect existed between the Cuban forces and the local Congolese rebels. This detachment spawns from a clash among differing worldviews and is the cause of many of the previous reasons for failure, such as conflict between Congolese and Cuban rebel forces, lack of a unified vision, and insufficient resources and support.

Before giving specific examples of differing worldviews, we must first generally compare the Cubans' worldviews and the local Congolese's worldviews. There are several factors within a community that contribute to its worldview. Here we will focus on four main factors according to Karanja Keita Carroll: ideology, axiology, ontology, and epistemology.

The principal difference between Guevara and the local Congolese citizens was their ideologies. Che entered the Congo with the dream of continuing the communist revolution on another front. To him, his ideals aligned with the needs of the rebels with whom he would fight alongside. Che explicitly clarified to Kabila that Cuban troops were present to serve the needs of the African leaders in their attempt to remove Kasavubu and Tshombe from power, eliminating imperialist intervention once and for all. Having witnessed the communists' success in Cuba, the locals hoped that their support would lead them to victory as well.

Many African worldviews' "axiological basis is grounded in cooperation and collective responsibility; corporateness and interdependence" (Keita Carroll 10). Even though these tenets align with communist and Marxist beliefs, Che and the Cuban forces' axiology differs in that the orientation of his values is more closely related to "Doing, Future-time, Individualism and Mastery-over-Nature" rather than the Afrikan "Being, Felt-time, Communalism and Harmony-with-Nature" (Dixon qtd in. Keita Carroll 10). According to Michael Löwy's research entitled *The Marxism of Che Guevara*, Marxism ought "to serve as a guide to action" (6). Guevara's Marxist ideology determined that his axiology would value action, future change through revolution, and the role of the individual over everything else, contrasting with Afrikan worldviews.

The ontological difference between Che and the Congolese forces is rooted in the way both parties view the very nature of beings and reality. African ontology "suggests that the nature of reality and being is spirit/energy," which should not be mistaken for religion (Keita Carroll 15). Dona Richards explains African spirituality, which contrasts with Euro-American and European emphasis on the material, by stating:

When a group of people share a common heritage, a common set of experiences and a common culture, an emotional bond is created between them [...] The idea of "spirit" is especially important for an appreciation of the African-American experience. "Spirit" is, of course, not a rationalistic concept. It cannot be quantified, measured, explained by, or reduced to, neat, rational, conceptual categories as Western thought demands. "Spirit" is ethereal. It is neither "touched" nor "moved", "seen" nor "felt" in the way that physical entities are touched, moved, seen and felt. These characteristics make it ill-suited to the mode of European academia and to written expression. (249)

Guevara's Marxist ideology and resulting economic beliefs were strictly focused on material reality. His theories vastly contradict the existence of spirituality, let alone that the most basic level of reality is spiritual. Che's inability to train, unify, and direct the Congolese tribes can be ascribed to his naivety regarding their ontological perspectives of the world.

In contrast, Che's worldview was similar to the Congolese worldviews on an epistemological level. In Euro-American worldviews "the knower will distance him/herself from the phenomena they are attempting to know. Within Afrikan worldviews, the knower attempts to be a part of the phenomena s/he is attempting to know" (Keita Carroll 11). Guevara's Marxist values, which call upon the individual to act towards true liberation, and his eagerness to join the Congolese troops in their fight against imperialism appear to lean slightly towards African epistemological approaches. He spent months travelling throughout Africa to gain knowledge of the political and economic situation in the Congo. His role in the Congolese revolution reflects the African epistemological value of inserting oneself in a specific phenomenon for better understanding.

INDICATIONS OF A BIGGER PICTURE

Several sources exist documenting Che's time in the Congo. There are government documents, communications between allied supporters, speeches, and several photos. Journals and interviews are also reliable sources that are often overlooked. These sources add more personal details to the daily activities and thoughts of the joint Cuban-Congolese rebels. In these historical artifacts we can find traces of a more fundamental issue. By looking for these details, we begin to develop a broader scope of the situation and weave together previous historical accounts.

In his article, Marc Jourdir relates a Cuban perception of the local rebels, stating the local Congolese "se niega a cavar trincheras porque los agujeros en la tierra son para los muertos y salen corriendo en cuanto se produce un choque serio." This is just one example of how the troops' ontological differences affected simple tasks and hindered the revolution. Guevara's Western guerrilla tactics, such as trench warfare, directly opposed the African worldview. He would have been more successful in leading and uniting the two forces had he taken the element of African spirituality into account. His lack of knowledge about the spiritual values of the Congolese led to frequent misunderstandings and misinterpretations of their actions. As Michela Wrong explains, "It all looked good on paper. But the Congolese regarded carrying heavy loads as below their dignity and would wander off, bored, when the Cubans tried to stage ambushes. Superstitious, they relied on 'dawa,' magic potions whipped up by witch doctors, for victory, emptying their magazines into the sky with eyes shut tight." Their lack of familiarity

with the local rebels' spiritual reality caused Che and the Cuban troops to constantly underestimate the Congolese tribes, provoking mutual distrust and dissension among the allied forces.

Although Che's Marxist ideology seems similar to the local troops' belief in cooperation and collective responsibility, the rigidity of his Marxist beliefs did not appeal to the local rebels. The Congolese rebel leaders may have understood the implications of accepting Cuban support and, therefore, the ideology that motivated Guevara, but the local tribes had no desire to adopt a Marxist mentality. The Cuban troops' ideology differed greatly from the Congolese forces' causing them to remain divided.

Upon hearing Guevara's plans in the Congo, former Egyptian president Nassar "was astonished, warning Guevara not to become 'another Tarzan, a white man among black men, leading them and protecting them...it can't be done'" (Gott xxiii). Guevara's worldview can be used to explain why, even though he shared similar epistemological values, the Congolese tribes still considered him an outsider. His willingness to fight alongside them, and potentially die for their cause, was not enough to convince the Congolese that their conflicting perspectives could be overcome. If anything, it made them question Guevara's motives even more. When aspects of Guevara's worldview differed, there was misunderstanding; when aspects of his worldview aligned, there was mistrust.

WHAT WOULD SUCCESS HAVE LOOKED LIKE?

Guevara failed. But what does that mean? What would success have looked like? Based on his experiences in Cuba and Bolivia and his strong journaling habits, we have a pretty good idea of his intentions. Guevara was very persistent in creating space for underrepresented populations to control means of production, such as land and resources. His goal for the Congo, and all of Africa, was for Africans to create functioning, healthy governments and economies for themselves. Based on his previous experiences and writings, I do not believe that he would have stuck around to see these ideas realize. His mission was to capture the attention of the existing government, inspire agency among the locals, use his expertise to initiate their revolution, and allow locals to finish the job. He drew attention to global issues of inequality and injustice, while attempting to give locals the tools that they would need to correct them. Based on his own writings we know that he had several other countries in mind for future revolution. After securing a place at the table for local authority in the restructuring of the Congolese government, I believe that Che would have moved on to his next revolution. As we saw in Cuba, he became anxious and disheartened by staying and serving in political positions. After all, he opposed the bourgeoisie everywhere and called for "many Vietnams" (Guevara "Message").

CONCLUSION

Ernesto "Che" Guevara's involvement in Africa is often eclipsed by his revolution and death in Latin America. Little research exists regarding his nine-month revolutionary campaign in the Congo and even less, if any, is available from African and Hispanic points of view. The little information available is in Guevara's personal *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria: Congo* or in texts which use the information from Che's "Congo Diary" to reconstruct the expedition. In the limited textual evidence of Guevara's presence in the Congo (often written from Western perspectives), many scholars have theorized as to why the Cubans failed in the Congo through a strictly political and economic approach. Some reasons include regionalism in the Congo, conflict between Congolese and Cuban rebel forces, insufficient resources, and a lack of a unified vision. However, these reasons can be interpreted on a more fundamental level. The Cubans', and more specifically Guevara's, opposing worldviews were the pivotal factor leading to divisiveness among the rebel forces in the Congo and the ultimate failure of their mission. Differentiating ideological, axiological, ontological, and epistemological values, led the Cubans to perceive "the morale and the competence of the Congolese rebels to be low" (Seddon). As for Guevara, instead of attempting to understand the allied African forces, he aspired to unify them according to his personal worldview which caused him to be regarded as "el hombre que soñaba con 'cubanizar a los congoleños'" (Jourdier). Che's lack of awareness and disregard for the way in which the Congolese interpreted their social world, the nature of their values and reality, and their knowledge processes led to divisiveness and mistrust at every level. This disunity inevitably precipitated the withdrawal of Cuban support and the Organisation of African Unity's willingness to negotiate with the Congolese government, resulting in Guevara's final abandonment of the Congo on November 20, 1965.

NOTES

- 1 From Guevara's "Patria o muerte" address at the 1964 United Nations General Assembly in New York City.
2. Biographical information taken from Paco Ignacio Taibo II's *Ernesto Guevara: También conocido como el Che* (1996).
3. Transcript not provided by video. Transcribed manually.
4. Transcript provided by video.

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Minicuentos

Melanie Taylor Herrera

“Instrucciones para tratar a la meteoróloga”

Estimados Colegas:

Agradecemos lean estas recomendaciones para evitar que se repitan las condiciones meteorológicas adversas que hemos estado experimentando:

1-Si la meteoróloga parece estar de mal humor, por favor NO le pregunte si está de mal humor. Eso la pone de peor humor y tendremos lluvias intensas toda la tarde.

2-A la meteoróloga le gusta café negro SIN LECHE, obvio, con edulcorante pues está a dieta. No le ofrezca café con leche y menos con azúcar refinada. Esto podría ocasionar un chubasco repentino.

3-La meteoróloga está pasando un divorcio muy, muy difícil. Tenemos que mostrar nuestra empatía y evitar los chismes que sólo ayudan a propagar información falsa y promover los malos entendidos con esta profesional del tiempo. No le mencione al marido ni le mire la mano a ver si tiene o no anillo. Evitemos los truenos y relámpagos.

4-¿Recuerdan las inundaciones de un mes atrás? Es triste que personas inocentes paguen por la insensibilidad de los colaboradores de esta estación televisiva. Jamás sugiera que la meteoróloga se ha equivocado en sus predicciones. Si dijo que el sol brillaría todo el día y llueve, evite los comentarios sarcásticos.

Atentamente,
La Gerencia

“La noticia más pequeña del mundo “

La Doctora Salazar saltaba en un pie, literalmente, y es que había estado a punto de destruir la evidencia. Los periodistas debían llegar en cualquier momento. Su descubrimiento había sido fortuito, un musgo del tamaño de la uña de un dedo meñique que resultaba ser diferente a los demás y ella, sí, ella lo había encontrado. Luego de tomarle fotos, describirlo y hasta bautizarlo era hora de hacer público sus hallazgos. Ya había redactado un artículo para una revista científica internacional. Los del equipo de noticias llegaron en tropel y apurados, no se fijaron en donde pusieron el

trípode, los pies y así, en cuestión de segundos, la noticia más pequeña del mundo desapareció.

“La noticia más corta del mundo”

Aaa. La exclamación duró acaso unos segundos. Pero era una exclamación que denotaba un hondo y genuino placer. Aurora colocó su mano en el centro de su mundo, entre las compuertas y sonrió para sí. El hombre más joven que yacía a su lado la miró con ojos somnolientos, la besó en los labios y se dispuso a dormir. Aurora a sus sesenta años se sentía algo sorprendida y a la vez complacida. Un orgasmo es siempre una buena noticia.

“La noticia más absurda del mundo”

¿Me dice que en un país con costas en dos océanos, un canal, lluvias torrenciales y ríos desbordados no tiene usted... agua?

“El tranque interminable”

¿Qué ocasionaba el tranque? ¿Una gallina cruzando la vía? ¿Unas reses en soltura? ¿Un choque? ¿Un arreglo vial? ¿Un accidente que involucraba varios autos, muertos y heridos? ¿Una balacera fuera de control? ¿Un desvío por la construcción del Metro? ¿Una manifestación? ¿Una marcha de protesta? ¿Un cierre de calle como protesta? ¿Un poste eléctrico que cayó sobre la vía? ¿Un camión de arena que perdió la arena? Es imposible saberlo pues es imposible llegar a la génesis del fenómeno, pero el tranque se extiende de este a oeste, cruza el puente de las Américas, y sigue fuera de la provincia de Panamá y también al sur, hacia Darién. Nadie llega a casa o sale de casa, ¿para qué? La gente ha salido de los autos, se sientan a la orilla a comerse algo, a charlar con otros conductores, a tomarse fotos o caminan a los pueblos cercanos. Los periodistas intentaron cubrir este tranque descomunal y fueron tantos los que se perdieron al cubrir la noticia, que no volvieron o no llegaron, que se han dado por vencidos. En los canales de noticias no tienen más remedio que hablar de libros y poemas, de pinturas y viejas leyendas ya casi olvidadas.

“La piel de Kim Shou”

Carlos Wynter Melo

Extraído del libro: *Mujeres que desaparecen*, Editorial: Uruk editores (Costa Rica) 2015, ISBN: 9789930526255

La piel de Kim Shou.

De: kjohnson@hotmail.com
Para: argeliab_2009@gmail.com

Querida Argelia,

Juan Carlos Guevara, compañero de cátedra y amigo, me acercó una carta de mediados de los setentas. Adivina de quién, de Orar Jiménez, tu persona preferida. Se la dirige a una mujer llamada Marie Duverger que, desde ahora te lo digo, no te va a resultar agradable.

La carta de Orar me llega en este momento de duda que atravesamos. ¿No te parece providencial, revelador? Claro que aún estos comentarios míos no te dicen nada. Pero espera y verás.

Es una señora carta. Engrandece la figura histórica de Orar. No deja títere con cabeza. Después de haber emigrado del Estados Unidos de los setentas a Burdeos, Francia, Jiménez no podía responder de otra forma.

Por supuesto, además de al hombre comprometido, verás al artista. Y al seductor, sin duda. Pero, sobre todo, verás a un niño que reflexiona, piensa y se pregunta, como estirando el cuello para ver a sus padres a los ojos, por qué somos como somos.

Me he dado a la tarea, por ti y solo por ti, de copiar lo que dice. Disfruta. Si te conozco bien, no vas a soltar la carta hasta que la termines.

Marie querida,
Burdeos, 7 de marzo de 1975

Veo que nuestra convivencia te dio la seguridad para hablarme de ti libremente. Me has contado de tus amigas y de lo que piensas de la clienta a la que frecuentemente debes atender. También has opinado, por fin, sobre el plato que solía estar siempre en mi comedor. Tu sinceridad me apabulla y creo que habría sido conveniente menos. Tu carta me ha dejado boquiabierto y, de inmediato, ha logrado que se me escape una carcajada.

No interpretes esto a la ligera; dame más tiempo para explicarte. Por supuesto, agradezco que me hayas permitido contemplar el lunar de estrella que tienes en el cuello, tú inmóvil y desnuda, ¿por cuánto?, ¿diez minutos? Eso ha sido una candidez y una generosidad por la que te tendré agradecimiento eterno. Te expliqué lo que significaban para mí los lunares, todos los lunares, y, sin más, me diste esa dádiva. Qué linda.

También agradezco, ahora al destino, que hayamos compartido más que una charla, más que un café, más que esos diez minutos de sosegada contemplación, y hayas accedido a darme lo mejor que un cuerpo puede dar a otro. Y es por esto, por lo mucho que me has regalado, que quiero ser transparente sobre quién soy yo, Orar Jiménez.

Sabes que soy un artista y posiblemente por eso te acercaste a mí. No te alarmes, que no te estoy reprochando nada. Sabes que nací en los Estados Unidos, hijo de un padre puertorriqueño y una madre irlandesa, y sabes que actualmente vivo en Burdeos, Francia, donde me conociste, dedicado a la traducción y a escribir. Mi habitación en Wellkhome Appartements debe haber sido una claraboya por la que asomarte a mi vida. Hasta aquí no debe haber sobresalto.

Lo que no sabes es cómo nació mi pasión por la epidermis humana – uno de los costados de esa pasión es mi gusto por los lunares. Me puede llevar a ser obsesivo, te consta. Esta es la historia del por qué. Espero no impacientarte.

En Chicago, hace algún tiempo, conocí a un hombre llamado Benny Woodrow. Benny administraba un centro cultural de minorías en el que ofrecí un par de recitales. Pero lo más interesante de Benny eran sus ideas, bastante bizarras, por cierto, sobre lo que estaba haciendo la CIA con estudios sobre la melanina. Como tal vez sabes, la melanina es la sustancia que colorea la piel. Y sí, estoy hablando de la CIA, the Central Intelligence Agency. Resulta ser que Benny conocía una persona, quien a su vez conocía a otra persona, que sostenía que, en laboratorios subterráneos, científicos aislados y cuyo anonimato se conservaba con celo, estaban creando melanina artificial. Según Benny, la degradación de la capa de ozono nos obligaría a proteger nuestra piel por cualquier método posible. ¿Y qué mejor modo que alterar las pigmentaciones, incluso eso? En el futuro, pues, todos

seríamos negros, según decía Benny. Y esa vez lo escuché como a los niños o a los locos, sin prestarle realmente atención, cuidándome de no contradecir sus palabras. Después de todo, debía llevar la fiesta en paz, por lo menos mientras fuera su invitado. Pero Benny me tenía preparada una chocante demostración.

No podíamos evitar uno o dos encuentros más, no mientras siguiera bajo su tutela y no se consumaran las lecturas. Al día siguiente, me encontré con él para desayunar y una vez terminamos, me invitó a una habitación que los dueños del hotel le reservaban para pequeñas reuniones. Ahí, sin previo aviso, sacó una jeringa con un líquido celeste en su tubillo, y se arremangó la camisa. Se clavó la aguja. ¡Qué es esto!, le dije, no pudiendo reaccionar con otras palabras, pensando que tal vez, solo tal vez, asistía al inicio de una fiesta de morfina, heroína o algo peor. Espera, contestó. Y no tuve que esperar mucho: su brazo comenzó a tornarse naranja, más bien, la piel de su brazo se tornó naranja. Y dijo él: pigmentación anaranjada. Y agregó: puede convertirse en una moda.

Pero más que modas, me sacudió hasta la médula que los cuerpos parecieran, con esa teatralidad de Woodrow, meros trajes que podemos cambiar como quien usa una camisa distinta cada día. ¿Qué éramos entonces? Y lo peor, o mejor, qué era Dios si nosotros podíamos llevar a cabo sus diseños. En vez de la pigmentación que el azar quiso darnos, pigmentación sintética. Y en vez de un lunar, un tatuaje, por ejemplo. Qué alta sastrería.

(¿Ahora comprendes por qué no puedo permanecer indiferente ante las observaciones tuyas? ¿Quién es esa clienta en realidad? ¿Lo sabes? ¿Sabías aquella noche en mi habitación del Wellkhome Appartements quién era yo?).

El evento terminó y dejé Chicago. No vale la pena hablar de nada más sobre Woodrow, no directamente, salvo decir que el efecto de la inyección no le duró mucho. Apenas un minuto después su brazo había vuelto a ser normal – la melanina original se abrió paso en la epidermis y el cuerpo acabó excretando la otra. Ahora debo contarte de Kim Shou.

Shou fue mi amante entre el 59 y el 61, si no me falla la memoria. Y ella fue la razón, por mucho, de que yo dejara los Estados Unidos sin mirar atrás. Simplemente no podía seguir en ese país. Ya no era mi país.

Kim Shou era hija de inmigrantes coreanos y convivimos exageradamente en los años que te dije. Más que amarla, me convertí en ella. Ya verás por qué lo digo. La conocí en la Universidad de California, extensión de Los Ángeles, lugar al que había vuelto después de residir en varias ciudades del este. Por supuesto, me llamó la atención su piel, que en realidad nunca me pareció tan amarilla como se piensa de la piel oriental, sino rosada y amarilla. Coincidíamos mucho en la biblioteca por pura eventualidad, y nunca pudimos encontrar otra razón más que esa, el azar, para tanto encuentro. Y resultó ser que había leído mi trabajo Ubicuidad y un día decidimos tomar algo en una cafetería

A pesar de los tiempos, la familia de Shou se había reproducido bastante. La chica tenía siete hermanos, tres varones y cuatro mujeres. Y todos vivían en una misma casa de las afueras de los Ángeles. Fui conociéndolos de una manera muy informal. Si entrábamos a un supermercado y Shou se detenía un momento para hablar con un chico oriental o una chica oriental, y lo hacía en un idioma extraño, que para mí podía ser mandarín o cantonés o cualquier otro, pero que era, por supuesto, coreano o hangugeo, como se le conoce en Corea, ya podía yo estar seguro de que era un pariente de Shou. Yo los saludaba con una sonrisa y después ella me aclaraba quién era exactamente.

Tendríamos un par de meses de estar juntos cuando me acompañó con mucha calma a mi apartamento. El silencio fue relajando cualquier oposición suya. Hicimos el amor sin prisas y sin originalidad. Nos desnudamos; doblamos con cuidado nuestras ropas, yo por no desentonar con su pulcritud; y nos acostamos en la cama matrimonial que presidía mi cuarto. Recuerdo que me levanté y estuve contemplando la desnudez que le había quedado descubierta. Registré en mi memoria su color, los lunares y cómo nacían los vellos en su cuerpo. Luego me acosté, y en las primeras horas de la madrugada, la escuché llorar. Después supe, con asombro, que ese día había dejado de ser virgen.

Con igual recato y primor, se apareció un día con una pequeña maleta. Parecía una flor blanca y lánguida parada frente al edificio. Supe entonces lo decisivo que había sido yo para ella. Y la acepté con tranquilidad, como si su llegada no fuera nada extraordinario. Entra, siéntate. Puedes usar esta gaveta para guardar lo que sea que lleves en tu maleta. Debes poder imaginarte la escena.

Y ahora hablemos del plato vacío que encontrabas siempre en mi pequeño comedor, puesto cuidadosamente. Hay un rito coreano que se realiza en honor a los muertos. Cuando un coreano parte al más allá, se cree que su espíritu permanece con sus descendientes por cuatro generaciones. Al rito se le llama Jerye. Shou me lo explicó y la escuché, después de las primeras palabras, como quien oye llover. No quería perder mucho tiempo con lo que me parecía un disparate, por lo menos en el sentido práctico. Las diferencias culturales eran abismales, por supuesto. Los latinoamericanos como yo no creemos que la vida sea más que un instante, y ella me pedía creer en la permanencia después de la muerte. Eso duró por un tiempo. De vez en cuando, llevaba el tema a nuestras conversaciones en la cama, después del sexo.

Una noche me dijo que su hermano, un bebé no nacido, le había consolado esa misma tarde. Continué con mi rutina de responder a lo que dijera con un interés convincente pero, por supuesto, falso. No llevábamos mucho en eso, cuando me calló con una frase seca;

—No me crees, ¿verdad?

Mi primera reacción fue negar. Pero no perseveré. Tuve que confesarle que no, que los muertos y yo no compartíamos los mismos espacios, y que nunca sería así.

—No es que lo veamos de esa manera, Orar – me dijo con cierta condescendencia -. Por lo menos yo no lo veo así. Los muertos de los que te hablo son de otra naturaleza. Se heredan las emociones, emociones que trascienden la carne, ¿sabes? Esta convivencia nuestra, por ejemplo, esta charla que estamos teniendo, lo que signifique para ti o para mí, ¿no crees que sobrevivirá más allá de la muerte?

No me quedó más que darle la razón. Y eso nos igualó, nos permitió hacernos uno. Me di cuenta de que lo que comenzaba a amar de Shou, era inseparable de sus creencias.

Y un día ocurrió, queridísima. Un día, encontré un cachorro de león en una esquina de mi sala, entre un borde del librero y el cortinaje. La expresión de felino era cordial, si cabe decir eso de un león. Y pronto me di cuenta de que estaba ante el hermano de Shou. No se lo dije a nadie, no se lo dije ni siquiera a Shou.

Una mañana me desperté y me dirigí a la cocina para preparar el desayuno, era lo acostumbrado. Solo tenía que calentar las sobras de Jeotgal, que no sé si era la mejor opción para un desayuno pero a Shou no le molestó nunca, ni a mí tampoco. Jeotgal es un platillo coreano, extrañísimo, hecho con mariscos y de un sabor salado y agrio. Nunca, te digo, jamás, creí que me llegaría a gustar. Pero comenzó a gustarme. Y después, me encantaba. Mis días comenzaron a moverse animados por el Jeotgal, porque además Shou lo hacía por kilos. Entonces me agaché para tomar una cacerola y lo vi, la sombra del cachorro. Y esa sola visión, me transfirió lo que significaba la muerte del hermano de Shou para Shou. Fue un sentimiento cálido, como calentarse al sol, pero también melancólico.

De ese momento en adelante, me di cuenta de que el leoncito se aparecía en las mañanas, sobre todo. Le acariciaba el lomo, le buscaba la mirada. Y después comíamos, ella y yo, enfrentados, y, en muchas ocasiones, dedicándonos miradas sostenidas por minutos.

Otra parte de Shou que se me metió bajo la piel es aún más extraña. Cuando los coreanos quieren llamar a una persona, lo hacen con la palma de la mano hacia abajo y agitando los dedos. No quieren que, ni casualmente, la mano tenga su palma hacia el frente. Y lo que pasa es que de ese modo, con la palma de la mano expuesta, se llama a los perros. Ya comprenderás por qué saludaba yo de una manera tan inusual. No era una bizzaría de artista, era algo más. Sin darme cuenta, comencé a copiárselo a Shou, y cuando menos lo esperaba, era como si yo fuera Shou. Ella se reía pero no estaba al tanto de lo que ocurría realmente.

Ahora pensemos en lo que me había pasado en Chicago, lo que Woodrow me había mostrado. ¿No eran ambas

experiencias una sola toma de conciencia? ¿No eran lo mismo?

Marie querida, puede que aún no comprendas lo que quiero decir. Por cierto, Shou también tenía una particularidad, una tan memorable como tu lunar estrellado. El vello púbico le crecía escasamente y en media luna. ¡Qué caprichos del Big bang! ¿Cierto? Así que como el tuyo, como el mío, su cuerpo era un incidente único. Pero como yo me estaba convirtiendo en Shou, no importaba, esos incidentes únicos eran intercambiables.

Y bien, ahora que me dices lo que piensas de esa clienta tuya, esa que te molesta tanto con sus solicitudes y a quien juzgas tan duramente, pienso en Shou y no puedo perdonarte. Date cuenta que, como te he dicho, mucho tengo de Shou dentro de mí. Así que, desde mi punto de vista, mujer, tú te acostaste con una chica, y una oriental, de piel amarilla, lo mismo que le recriminas a esa clienta tuya cuya sexualidad no comprendes.

Así que están puestas mis cartas sobre la mesa. Siéntete avergonzada de lo que hiciste en mi cuarto porque mi piel, linda, puede ser otra de un momento a otro. Yo solo me lamento de que personas como tú, salvo que aun más estúpidas, hayan atacado a Kim Shou una noche que no olvidaré, y me hayan dejado su esencia que vuelve desde entonces, un osezno.

¿Pero qué sabes tú de eso?

Suerte, Marie querida.

Orar

¿Cómo te quedó el ojo, mi amor? Orar me ha hecho quererte más, y eso no creo que cambie. ¿Nos vemos para la cena?

Te quiere,
Karen.

“Boxeador”

Carlos Wynter Melo

Extraído del libro: *Bogotá 39* (antología temática/varios autores), Editorial: Ediciones B, 2007, ISBN: 9789588294216

No sabemos si Martínez es mala persona. Tampoco podríamos decir que es un alma de Dios. Ausente, si alguna palabra lo define es esa: ausente. Y nadie conoce sus emociones ni entiende por qué es feliz con una vida tan simple, de figuras de sombra y boxeo.

Martínez no conocía a Orlando el Nica Mojica; no, señor. Habrán intercambiado saludos alguna vez, no más que eso. No tenían por qué odiarse, como han insinuado algunos periódicos. La Sombra Martínez –le he dicho a los reporteros– es incapaz de odiar a alguien.

Hay quien pudiera, viendo la apariencia distraída de Martínez, pensar que es tonto. Tampoco es el caso. No se le puede llamar tonto a quien proyecta figuras en la pared con semejante maestría. Si se me pregunta, les diré que Martínez es sencillamente un libro en blanco. Nada más y nada menos. Y nadie sabe al instante siguiente qué aparecerá en sus páginas. El tipo vive tras sus ojos y, en el momento justo, ¡zas!, sale a la superficie. Entonces es un genio; como cuando exhibe su boxeo matemático. Aún ahora, con los años encima, la manera como planea y desarrolla un combate es ilustre.

En la víspera de la pelea con el Nica, la Sombra me contó su sueño. Más que un sueño, era una pesadilla. Y es que basta recordar la vida que llevaba Martínez antes de ser campeón: pobre que era, un muerto de hambre en todo el sentido de la palabra. Cuando tenía como seis años –y eso es algo que no olvidó nunca–, un tipo le robó los chicles que vendía. Le dijo: Pelaíto, yo te voy a comprar todos tus chicles, todos, pero tienes que dármelos y esperar un momentito aquí; yo regresaré con tu plata. El tipo, por supuesto, nunca regresó. Ese día Martínez juró por todos los santos que no volverían a aprovecharse de él. Me dijo en una ocasión:

—Yo, de niño, era muy tonto, después cambié y me hice hombre.

En el sueño, a la Sombra le daban una tunda, una soberana paliza. Varias veces soñó lo mismo: se miraba en un espejo y del azogue oscuro brotaba un rostro que no alcanzaba a definirse y salía un puño y otro y Martínez

no sabía ni de dónde le venían los puñetes. Mientras lo apaleaban, una voz le decía: Ya estás viejo, boxeador, ya estás muy viejo, te has vuelto débil. Despertaba empapado en sudor y con los brazos tensos. Durante el sueño, el miedo no lo dejaba ni respirar. Me comentó después un poco asustado:

—Hombre, no me sentía así desde hacía años. Estaba indefenso. No quiero dormir por no sentirme igual.

Quizás ese miedo oculto lo llevó a esforzarse extraordinariamente. Él nunca aceptó que estaba viejo. Para él, había Martínez para rato. Y ya a nadie le cabe duda después de su pelea con el Nica. La gente lo respeta otra vez.

La Sombra ha ganado mil apuestas haciendo figuras en los muros. Es tan natural para él como respirar. Le dicen Haz una pantera y él rápidamente crispera los dedos de una mano, acomoda los de la otra y la pantera aparece. Su figura preferida es la de un niño caminando, con su perfil muy bien definido, los brazos moviéndose al compás de la marcha y las piernas flexionándose una y otra vez. Alguien dijo una noche, maravillado por la habilidad del boxeador, que bien podían ser las sombras las que proyectaban a Martínez. Yo lo he observado mucho y por Dios que, a simple vista, eso parece.

Por su parte, el Nica era un tipo –que Dios me perdone– bocón. Era de esos que repiten una y otra vez que nadie les dura más de un asalto y que el contendiente acabará hecho papilla. Martínez permaneció tranquilo ante sus bravuconadas. En vez de gastar pólvora en gallinazo, se concentró en los entrenamientos. Fue obsesivo. Y me causaba dolor verlo así; le dije más de una vez que eso no era normal.

En fin, llegó el día del combate y ocurrió lo que todos sabemos: la Sombra mató al Nica. ¡Fue una zurra histórica! No podemos quitarle méritos al Nica –que en paz descansen–: se portó a la altura. Pero la Sombra fue implacable. Recibió golpes como un animal y, aun así, mantuvo su ofensiva. Cuando el Nica cedió a la presión, la Sombra aplicó su estrategia ganadora: lo trabajó con la izquierda y, de inmediato, con volados de derecha. Ya para entonces, ambos tenían las caras bañadas con sangre. Y cayó el Nica. Su cuerpo empezó a convulsionar sobre la lona. Entró el médico y eso fue todo. La Sombra seguía saltando sobre las puntas de sus pies, sin que se pudiera decir si estaba compungido o contento.

Sacamos a Martínez cubierto por su bata de lujo. Muchas personas lo abuchearon y algunos periodistas lo siguieron. Nos llovían latas y restos de comida. Bueno, eso es lo que todos sabemos. Voy a contar ahora lo que solo yo sé; yo, que fui a visitar a la Sombra durante su convalecencia y que lo escuché como solo lo hacen quienes quieren de verdad.

Sé, por ejemplo, las razones por las cuales el campeón dejó su carrera boxística. Y sé también lo que lo cambió de manera tan drástica, lo que lo hizo, precisamente, otra persona.

Recuerdo que me recibió con una amplia y juguetona sonrisa y que él fue el primero en hablar:

—Se nos murió el Nica.

Solo asentí.

—No he dejado de pensar en él. Las pesadillas continuaron después de su muerte, ¿sabes? Yo pensé que al ganarle iban a parar.

—¿Y qué tienen que ver las pesadillas con el Nica, campeón?

—Se me metió entre ceja y ceja que el Nica era el rostro en el espejo, el de la pesadilla. Creí que el Nica era mi destino y me daba un hijueputa miedo mi destino, ¿me entiendes?

Nos quedamos en silencio. Era la primera vez que la Sombra se confesaba. Añadió como si hablara solo:

—Las pesadillas continuaron después de su muerte porque yo no he resuelto nada con vencer al Nica. Me concentré en superar mi destino y en realidad no superé nada.

Volvimos a callar.

—¿Recuerdas lo que dijo el tipo de mis sombras?, ¿que no sabía si ellas eran quienes me proyectaban a mí? Bueno, yo tampoco lo sé. Yo no sé si el odio me movía contra el Nica. Yo no sé si le pegué con saña. No lo sé.

—Ya no pienses en eso —le dije para calmarlo.

—No te preocupes. No hablo con angustia. De este momento en adelante, soy libre, para bien o para mal. Ya nada me importa demasiado. ¡Descubrí la identidad del rostro de la pesadilla! Todo es muy obvio, amigo: cuando uno se mira en un espejo, ¿de quién es la cara que aparece?

Book Review

*Manuel Zapata Olivella (1920-2004): Pensador político,
radical y hereje de a diáspora Africana en las Américas*
by George Palacios

Dawn F. Stinchcomb • Purdue University

Palacios, George. *Medellín, Colombia: Editorial Pontificia Bolivariana, 2020; 221 pps. Spanish.*

In 2004, the world lost “la voz más importante de la literatura afro colombiana” It is indisputable that Manuel Zapata Olivella was an intellectual of the highest level; he was a trained medical doctor, an anthropologist and an accomplished writer. He was an award-winning novelist, a poet, a dramaturg, and an essayist. While not the oldest, nor the most famous of the Latin American writers of African descent, he was certainly one of the most popular and most admired, if the number of books and articles published about him and his writings are any indication. This is despite the fact that his actual works have never had the large appeal of Cuba’s Nicolás Guillén beyond the audience of scholars of Latin American literature, George Palacios’ study of Zapata Olivella’s political writing is one of several monographs—at least a dozen—that examines Zapata Olivella’s works with a critical eye on his literary production as “heretical” and radical works, within the framework of the rhetoric of national identity and postcolonial intellectual thought.

Referencing Anthony Brogues’ *Black Heretics, Black Prophets* (2003) in his analysis of Zapata Olivella’s work, Palacios acknowledges the Colombian author’s intentions to “repensar la diáspora por medio de una reconfiguración de la cartografía conceptual que se refiere a los conceptos de ‘raza’, ‘etnia’, y diáspora’, tanto en la crítica cultural local colombiana como en la crítica cultural latinoamericana” and beyond (11). Divided into five very dense chapters, this study proposes to demonstrate that Manuel Zapata Olivella was an intellectual whose writing proposed to “hacer inteligible la dislocación sujeto-comunidad de la afrodiáspora Colombia y más allá de sus fronteras imaginadas” (12). Each chapter opens with a very deep study of the criticism published about Zapata Olivella’s writing as articulations of the African Diaspora in Latin America and continues examining further these articulaciones relevant to the heretical and prophetic writing, the political writing of the black author in Latin America. Palacios opens his first chapter with a focus precisely on the literary criticism produced in the US

on the afro diasporic literature in Spanish in his attempt to demonstrate what he calls the “necesidad de ampliar el espectro de las interpretaciones sobre la producción intelectual de [Zapata Olivella]” in order to go beyond the tendency to see him solely as a “literato” but also recognize Manuel Zapata Olivella as a great thinker that “articula una amplia crítica de la historia y la cultura características del intelectual afrodiaspórico hereje, radical y profético (11). Citing the 1970s as the decade that produced the first significant studies on black writing in Latin America, Palacios delves into some of the seminal works of two of the best-known scholars of Afro Latin American literature, beginning with Richard L. Jackson and Marvin A. Lewis. He states that Jackson argued for the meticulous study of black writers’ works, as it would be necessary to raise awareness of these authors and to show the aesthetic, cultural, and interpretive value of their works to ensure an opening of the literary canon, as well as an understanding of the process of racialization in Latin America. Palacios reminds us that Jackson describes Manuel Zapata Olivella’s works as “the most exhaustive and one of the most important expressions in the Latin American context from Colombia” (13) For Palacios, Lewis’ articles about Zapata Olivella’s novels and his 1987 monograph *Treading the Ebony Path: Ideology and Violence in Contemporary Afro-Colombian Prose Fiction* “construct a cartography of the fiction produced by afrocolombian authors in terms of the importance of the ethnic question as a backdrop for his aesthetic production and show how said production relates to Colombian society in general terms” (14). Whether Palacios thinks the perspectives of these scholars about Zapata Olivella’s work is positive remains to be seen; Palacios seems to be ambivalent on the matter. What is certain is that after locating and considering all the early literary criticism published about Zapata Olivella’s works, Palacios skillfully articulates the literary criticism of Zapata Olivella’s work with other studies about the African diaspora in Latin America, with special attention to Haiti to demonstrate the strength of heretical and radical political thought in the context of African diaspora.

In the second chapter, the critical writing of anthropologists George Reid Andrews and Peter Wade take center stage as Palacios explores the twin concepts of race and mestizaje in the rhetoric of the Colombian nation-state. Palacios' examination of Zapata Olivella's prose further perpetuates the characteristic "darkening" or *oscurimiento* of Colombian literature. The discussion of the appropriation of elements of African culture as expressed in music, dance, and religions of Latin America by the white elite in Latin America, elements once abandoned out of shame of their non-european origins, are re-evaluated in the second and third decades of the 20th century, when race mixture or mestizaje not only formed a part of the national identity of these countries, but also served as evidence of the racial democracy that some nations purported had made racial discrimination a non-issue in their societies. In this chapter, the texts of cultural criticism of Gilberto Freyre, Fernando Ortiz, José Vasconcelos, José Carlos Mariátegui, José Enrique Rodó and Carlos Siso are highlighted as examples of the use of the concept of national identity in the debate about race and nation formation in Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, the countries of the Southern Cone, and Venezuela, respectively. But while the discourse of racial democracy was really about achieving the ideal of whiteness as a prerequisite to citizenship, Palacios argues it ran in opposition to the actual intentions of bourgeois society that equated blackness and indigeneity to racial inferiority and barbarism. As he deconstructs the ideals of national identity in the writings of Colombian intellectuals of the Independence period—Francisco José de Caldas, José María Samper, and Luis López de Mesa, Palacios confirms that racial democracy was indeed a myth because it did nothing more than give an impression of the existence of a raceless society in nations that intended to erase afrodescendientes and indígenas from the national portrait for the sake of "modernity" and "progress" (62). Palacios' thorough dissection of Colombian rhetoric on national identity soon gives way to an explanation of the world in which Manuel Zapata Olivella was born, which, in turn, is itself the motivation of the heretical and prophetic writing that he would produce over his sixty years of literary production. While Palacios takes care to detail the history of the role the ideology of race has had in the development of Colombia, he is actually providing the reader with the context of the foundations of Zapata Olivella's first political writing of the 1930s and his unsurprising friendship and mutual admiration with the African American writer Langston Hughes.

The third chapter delves into Zapata Olivella's travel writing, written as he traversed the continents of North America and Asia in the 1940s and 1950s, during which time he produced three autobiographical travel texts: *Pasión Vagabunda* (1949), *He visto la noche* (1953), and *China 6 am* (1955). Palacios notes that the genre of these three texts, in particular, have proven difficult for literary critics to categorize. While for some, like François Bignolo, they exemplify

travel narratives, Palacios signals that for Marvin A. Lewis, the afrocentric perspective that serves as the thematic thread that binds all of Zapata Olivella's works in fiction gives these three works makes them more autobiography than travel writing (103). Admittedly, while the importance of the categorization of these and any of Zapata Olivella's works may seem trivial, it is here where Palacios' objectives upon writing this monograph reveal themselves. When discussing Lewis' perspective of these three texts, it becomes apparent that Palacios agrees that we find Zapata Olivella's expression of his racial and cultural consciousness developing in these texts. The tri-ethnic nature of Zapata Olivella's racial identity is emphasized and the consciousness-raising experiences that his travels afforded him also brought him to characterize the experience of African descendants in the Americas as the common experiences of the underdog globally, as Palacios notes is evident in the incorporation of "elementos que afirman la hermandad/identidad de los pueblos" (149) in China, 6 a.m and argues that it is also here that Zapata Olivella's social activism conflates with his writing with the intention of creating a space for the racialized pueblo among the "processes of representation and power" (151, translation mine).

In the fourth chapter, Palacios continues his description of the development of Zapata Olivella's *concientación racial* in the 6th decade of the 20th century, when he says, that "the accumulation of the author's experiences now transform into ideas, reflections and literary creations" are situated between Colombian, regional Spanish American and Western global ones from the perspective of an Afro Diasporic lens (153, translation mine). Palacios cites Múñera who describes this as the era of the Colombian author's dedication to the promotion of his nation's literary excellence. This "nacionalismo literario" highlights what for Zapata Olivella is the literary duty [el *quehacer literario*] of Spanish America: the novel. For his discussion of the socially compromised novel, Palacios largely focuses on *Chambacú, corral de negros* (1967). He contradicts a Colombian scholar that has written that Zapata Olivella others the black subject in the novel and asserts, at the conclusion of the chapter, that in *Chambacú*, Zapata Olivella accomplishes a re-articulation of familiar paradigms associated with the intersection of post-colonialism and modernity, leaving the protagonist Máximo precisely at the crossroads between his Black community and the African Diaspora.

The fifth and last chapter of this monograph examines the literary social activism of Zapata Olivella found in his last novels and essays published at the end of the twentieth and at the beginning of the twentieth centuries. In particular, Palacios focuses on the creation of the *muntu americano* upon its first appearance in the novel *Changó, el gran putas* (1983). The bantu word *muntu*, which refers to human beings, alive or dead, first brought to the western world through Janheinz Jahn's variably titled book *Muntu* in 1961,

is ideologically imposed in *Changó* when its author added the word “americano”; the philosophy that Zapata Olivella espouses by using this word establishes that the African in the New World is a new man. Palacios cites Lewis in his description of the importance of the concept of synchronic vs diachronic time with the use of the *muntu americano* in the novel. The *muntu americano* is the survivor of colonialism and the very essence of the African diaspora in the confluence of ancestral memory abundant in the New World.

Further demonstrating the heretical and activist nature of Zapata Olivella’s writing, Palacios argues that before Trouillot’s reverence of the Haitian Revolution, Manuel Zapata Olivella had long acknowledged the importance of Mackandal and Toussaint L’Overture as America’s first Black heretics and prophets to create what Trouillot refers to “a non-event”, that is the largest and most impactful revolution in American history in which the Black oppressed overcome the White oppressors to form the first Black republic outside of the continent of Africa; the event that is not spoken about is “an unthinkable history”. The heresy of that event committed is that they imagined themselves capable of defeating white supremacy, which the western world could not imagine possible of inferior beings believed to lack the intellect and forethought to conspire together, let alone to defeat their captors and form a government and nation of their own.

Palacios’ monograph makes a deep dive into all Zapata Olivella’s best works and the criticism about them to bring to the fore his own “cartography”—borrowing from the author himself—of the development of Afro Colombian and Afro Latin American literature. Palacios’ investigation is well-researched and clearly shows the process of “racialization”, or “darkening”, of Colombian letters that decidedly goes beyond the national rhetoric of Latin American *mestizaje* and settles comfortably among the literature of the African Diaspora with all its textures and complexities. While not at all heavy in jargon, this book is a challenging read. Palacios cites heavily from other scholars and his prose produces long paragraphs, sometimes of only two sentences. There is more code-switching than I would like in a single sentence—but it is a necessary evil due to the fact that much of the criticism that he cites is in English. This book is written in Spanish, and that may limit its audience outside of Latin America, but for the scholar of the African Diaspora who can read Spanish, this book has much value for all fans of great writers; specifically, this is a must-own for fans of Manuel Zapata Olivella. It would be of interest also to those working with Latin American literature in general and those interested in sociopolitical writings, literary activism, and themes of race and national identity. However, I find it would be of most value to any literary scholar that wants to learn more about writers of the African Diaspora.

Dawn F. Stinchcomb, Purdue University

Book Review

Unmastering the Script: Education, Critical Race Theory, and the Struggle to Reconcile the Haitian Other in Dominican identity, by Sheridan Wigginton and Richard T. Middleton IV

Alexandra Channell • Texas Christian University

Unmastering the Script: Education, Critical Race Theory, and the Struggle to Reconcile the Haitian Other in Dominican Identity. Wigginton, Sheridan and Richard T. Middleton IV. The University of Alabama Press, 2019

In *Unmastering the Script: Education, Critical Race Theory, and the Struggle to Reconcile the Haitian Other in Dominican Identity*, Sheridan Wigginton and Richard T. Middleton IV investigate the relationship between the positionality of Haitians in Dominican society and the social construction of Dominican identity in the Dominican Republic. Wigginton and Middleton examine Dominican curricular materials to illustrate dominant ideology in the Dominican Republic's demarcation of Haitian descent, identity and blackness as distinct from and inferior to Dominican descent, identity and blackness. The authors refer to this discriminatory narrative as the Haitian Other master script. Throughout the book, the authors interrogate the influence of this Haitian Other master script in shaping Dominican history and defining Dominican national identity.

Wigginton and Middleton begin the book with an introduction describing the turbulent history between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. This section outlines the complex interplay of racial identity, politics, and curriculum in Dominican society, justifying the use of critical race theory as the framework for the text. The authors organize the remainder of the book into five chapters that offer varying vantage points for examining white supremacy and black inferiority embedded within social science textbooks and historical biographies taught to school-age students.

In Chapter One, "La Trinitaria: The Elevation of Whiteness and Normalization of a Pigmentocracy in Dominican Society", Wigginton and Middleton analyze the biographies of three revered national "heroes" commonly included in school curriculum: Juan Pablo Duarte, Ramón Matías Mella, and Francisco del Rosario Sánchez. The authors

highlight how these biographies position phenotypic traits of whiteness at the crux of elevated social status and patriotism. Descriptions of these political figures extend beyond their personal achievements and contributions to also emphasize ancestry. The narratives support pigmentocracy by suggesting that skin hues closer to whiteness are superior, and by "clarifying" that darker skin hues of Dominicans do not reflect Haitian ancestry. The authors effectively embed a portrait of each member of La Trinitaria within the text to provide the reader with additional context and illustrate the distancing of Haitian blackness from Dominican blackness.

In Chapter Two, "Truth and Trujillo: A Critical Approach to Studying the Trujillo Dictatorship", Wigginton and Middleton describe the leadership of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, who served as a dictator in the Dominican Republic for thirty years. During his reign, he propagated a malicious anti-black and anti-Haitian agenda. Through analysis of an eighth-grade social science textbook, Wigginton and Middleton identify lessons and activities related to Trujillo's regime and explicate missed opportunities for students to engage in critical civic discourse that interrogates the Haitian Other master script, challenges the political and social agendas of former leaders, and evaluates the subsequent impact on Dominican society. These missed opportunities not only reflect poor pedagogy but also reinforce detrimental messages for all students, especially students of Haitian descent.

Chapter Three, "The "Masters" of the Script: Joaquín Balaguer, José Francisco Peña Gómez, and the Anti-Haitian Nation", examines biographies of politicians published in 2006 and explores how the "otherness" of Haitians often promotes political agendas. They describe the political strategy of racial priming commonly used in the United States, and demonstrate how similar tactics are exercised in the Dominican Republic. The biography of politician José Francisco Peña Gómez exemplifies how textbooks often

portray Haitians as a threat to Dominicans, with Dominican identity or *dominicanidad* (Dominican-ness) as something to be proven and accepted, and Haitian identity as a hurdle to overcome.

Chapter Four, “Dominican National Identity: Social Science Textbooks and the Boundaries of Blackness”, compares the characterization of national identity in textbooks published a decade apart. The authors evaluate three themes commonly perpetuated in the Dominican Republic as a rubric for their analysis:

- (1) blackness represents less desirable social status
- (2) blackness can be prevented through generational *blanqueamiento* (whitening)
- (3) blackness is represented by negative and exaggerated stereotypes

Illustrations in the older textbooks depicted darker-skinned people in lower wage jobs and with exaggerated and stereotypical physical features. While the authors noted that the more recent textbook illustrations portrayed fewer negative depictions of darker-skinned people, they also suggested that the underlying messaging of identifying and constructing Dominican identity based on European traits remained largely unchanged.

In Chapter Five, “Color, Classrooms, and the Haitian Other”, Wigginton and Middleton describe the failure of the *Plan decenal de educación acción* (Ten-Year Education Plan in Action), a project intended to improve content in social science textbooks. Despite the plan’s stated goals of focusing on the construction of a national identity that opposes racism and othering, textbook content following the plan’s institution continued to perpetuate mindsets and processes aligned with Eurocentricity and the erasure and rejection of African ancestry. The authors suggest that progress in dismantling the Haitian Other master script and prejudicial views of *dominicanidad* relies on adopting culturally relevant textbooks, and instituting culturally relevant pedagogy to engage students in historically accurate, age-appropriate, critical discussions that intellectually challenge negative perceptions of blackness. Wigginton and Middleton close the text by acknowledging that culturally relevant textbooks serve as only one tactic in reconstructing the Haitian Other master script. The authors recommend repurposing the Haitian Other master script to provide a more inclusive narrative of Dominican history and illustrate more holistic representations of Dominican identities, rather than only portraying stories that favor whiteness.

In *Unmastering the Script: Education, Critical Race Theory, and the Struggle to Reconcile the Haitian Other in Dominican Identity*, Wigginton and Middleton constructively contribute to the dialogue regarding racial identity and politics in the Dominican Republic through the lens of Dominican curricula. They provide an informative synopsis of the “othered” identity of Haitians in the Dominican Republic, which is central to readers’ understanding of the text. The authors engage readers with numerous graphics, contextual examples, and Spanish passages, which contribute to the authenticity of the provided information, leaving readers more informed about the role of the Haitian Other master script in Dominican society.

While the authors broach connections between textbook adoptions, political motivations, and critical race theory, an explicit definition and less nuanced application of the term “critical race theory” could benefit readers and strengthen the rationale for this critical framework. Further, given that race is the focal point of this text, a researcher positionality statement could provide additional insight to the reader. Another helpful inclusion could be more information surrounding the selection criteria (rationales for inclusions and exclusions) of the social science textbooks selected for this book, and the methods used in this research. This inclusion might also assist readers in constructing greater comprehension of the pervasiveness of the Haitian Other master script throughout Dominican curricula and society.

Even so, Wigginton and Middleton not only offer critical information about textbook adoptions in the Dominican Republic, but also offer valuable insight into the benefits of culturally responsive (and inclusive) pedagogy, and the implications of vetting textbooks through culturally responsive lenses prior to use in the classroom. Their vivid examples reveal the impact of classroom materials on students’ identities, which may be informational to educators seeking to support the identity development of students who are often underrepresented or negatively represented in curriculum. The authors weave a thread of hope and admonition relevant to educators and policymakers striving for racial equity: reform is vital and overdue.

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Damaris Puñales-Alpizar, is Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies, Chair of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, and Executive Sponsor for Alianza Latina/Latin Alliance at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU.) Her areas of specialization are Caribbean Culture, Transatlantic, and Translation Studies. Her publications include the books *La maldita circunstancia. Ensayos sobre literatura cubana* (2020); *Asedios al caimán letrado: literatura y poder en la Revolución cubana* (2018, edited with Emilio J. Gallardo Saborido, and Jesús Gómez de Tejada); *El Atlántico como frontera. Mediaciones culturales entre Cuba y España* (2014, editor); and *Escrito en cirílico. El ideal soviético en la cultura cubana posnoventa* (2012). Her articles have appeared in leading journals in the United States, Cuba, Russia, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Canada, Peru, France, and Spain, such as *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, *Caribbean Studies*, *Revista Iberoamericana*, *La Habana Elegante*, *Kamchatka*, *Vallejo&Co*, *Revista de Letras*, *Artemis*, *Cuadernos del Sur*, *Teatro*, *Cuadernos del Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos*, etc. She has coordinated the special dossiers “Cuba: A Cultural Prospection,” for the academic journal *Cuadernos del Sur*, (National University of the South, Argentina. Currently in press), and “Cuba: The Soviet Flavor of a Tropical Island. A Visit 20 Years Later,” for *La Habana Elegante*. *Revista semestral de literatura y cultura cubana, caribeña, latinoamericana, y de estética No. 51* (Spring-Summer 2012). In 2018, Dr. Puñales-Alpizar was a Fulbright Scholar in Russia to complete research for her current scholarly project on the geopolitics of socialist translations, and in 2021 she won an Expanding Horizons Initiative Grant to organize the international conference “Translation Practices during the Cold War: A Multidisciplinary Approach.”

Amy J. King is a PhD candidate and instructor of record in the Department of Hispanic Studies at Texas A&M University. She received a BA in Spanish and Latin American Studies and a MA in Hispanic Studies from Stephen F. Austin State University. Her dissertation explores Latin American and Spanish literature and culture, specifically canonical, religious, and revolutionary figures through a literary lens. Her dissertation is tentatively titled “*Quixotic Canonization: Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara in Postmodern Fiction.*”

Carlos Oriel Wynter Melo (ciudad de Panamá, 1971) es narrador de cuentos y novelas. La crítica literaria ha reconocido en su obra el uso del doble, la parodia y las ficciones insertas en otras ficciones. Fue seleccionado como uno de los 39 autores jóvenes más importantes de Latinoamérica en el marco de Bogotá 39 (2007). Y fue elegido como uno de los 25 Secretos Mejor Guardados de Latinoamérica en el aniversario 25 de la Feria Internacional del Libro de Guadalajara.

En el año 2021, la revista *Latino Book Review* lo incluyó entre los seis escritores panameños y contemporáneos que hay que leer. Su novela *Las impuras* fue finalista en el premio de la Asociación de Escritores Caribeños. Su libro más reciente es *Mujeres que desaparecen* (editorial Uruk, San José, Costa Rica, 2015). Y pronto aparecerá *Literatura olvidada* (editorial Sudaquia, Nueva York, EEUU, 2021), colección de la cual es parte el cuento Ceguera.

Melanie Taylor Herrera (Panamá, 1972) es una artista panameña que se expresa a través de la música y la escritura. Tiene un técnico superior en Violín, una licenciatura en Psicología, una maestría en Musicoterapia y una especialización en Docencia Superior. Es miembro de la Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional de Panamá. Como escritora tiene especial interés en los microrrelatos. En 2009 su libro de cuentos “*Camino a Mariato*” ganó el premio Rafaela Contreras otorgado por la Asociación Nicaragüense de Escritoras. Ha sido incluida en numerosas antologías tales como “*Un espejo roto*”: antología del nuevo cuento en Centroamérica (2014), *Puente Levadizo* (Panamá-España, 2015), *Qubit: antología de la nueva ciencia ficción latinoamericana* (Cuba, 2011), *Brevirus* (Chile, 2020), entre otras. Zeta Centuria Editores (Argentina) publicó su poemario *Mujerona* este año. Su blog literario se denomina “*Cuentos al garete*”.

Alexandra Channell is a Ph.D. Candidate at Texas Christian University where she also earned her M.Ed. in Educational Leadership. She graduated with a B.S. in Health Science from Boston University and currently serves as a secondary school administrator. Her dissertation explores the influence of single-sex schooling on race and gender identity development.

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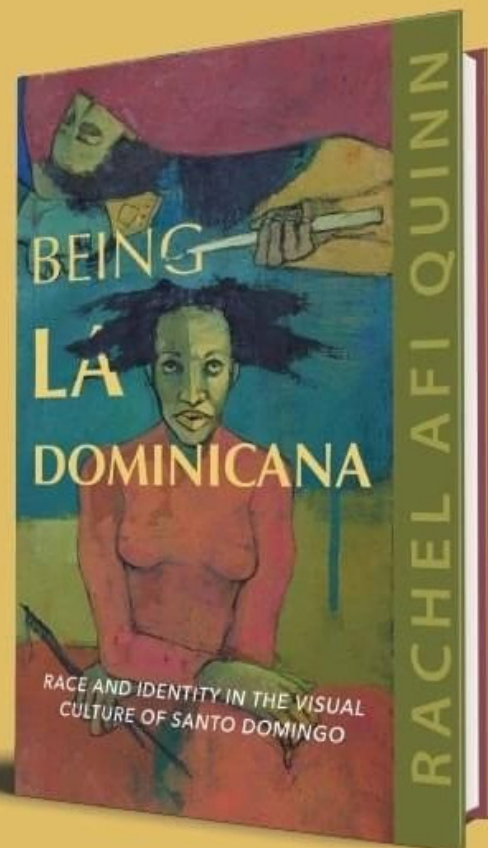
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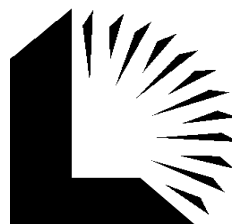
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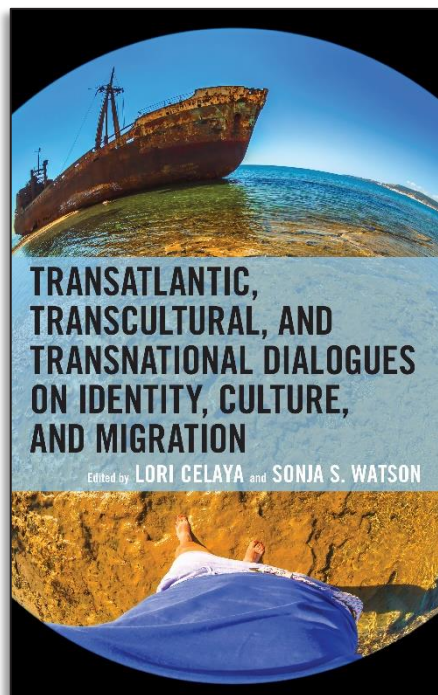
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CONTRIBUTORS: Stephanie Álvarez, Marta Boris Tarre, Martín Oliver Carrión, Lori Celaya, Eugenia Charoni, Jana F. Gutiérrez Kerns, Luisa Marcela Ossa, Jm. Persánch, Paulette A. Ramsay, and Sonja Stephenson Watson

“An innovative, wide-ranging collection of essays that address ‘trans’ topics in spirited and challenging ways.”
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“Lori Celaya and Sonja Watson’s intriguing and wide-ranging collection explores the multiple dimensions of the *trans* prefix—transnational, transcultural, transcontinental, and even transracial—among people of Latin American origin in the United States, Latin America, and Spain. This well-edited volume provides fresh insights on novels, poems, chronicles, popular songs, telenovelas, and other cultural genres, especially by promoting a broad interdisciplinary dialogue about the transformative implications of the massive movement of people across national borders. I recommend it as a significant and original contribution to the intertwined fields of Latino, Latin American, Caribbean, and Afro-Latino studies.”

— **Jorge Duany, author of *Blurred Borders: Transnational Migration between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States* (2011)**

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Lori Celaya is associate professor and director of Latin American studies at the University of Idaho.

Sonja Stephenson Watson is dean of the AddRan College of Liberal Arts, and professor of Spanish at Texas Christian University.

“Thoroughly researched and refreshingly expansive in its areas of focus, this volume weaves an energetic, cohesive, and engaging thread of transatlanticism/culturalism/nationalism through the fields of music, literature, religion, language, and politics. Each innovative chapter stands on its own as a focused dive into how African diasporic communities navigate various forms of ‘crossing’ to create an identity in new geographic, political, and linguistic spaces. Most significantly, however, is the work’s collective message that a thoughtful consideration of ‘culture from below’ invites a rich, interdisciplinary discussion about the interconnectedness of migration and identity in Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean.”

— **Sheridan Wigginton, California Lutheran University and President of the Afro-Latin/American Research Association**

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