

# Writing to be Seen and Heard, Equal Citizens, and Black

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Jerome C. Branche, Editor. *Black Writing, Culture, and the State in Latin America*. Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015. 288pp. ISBN 978-0-8265-2062-3.

Branche's anthology offers an interdisciplinary approach to Black Latin American and Caribbean negotiations with identity, freedom, culture and the racialized state. Countering those who argue for a Latin American multiracial exceptionalism to the black/white binary and white supremacy, these scholars analyze creative writers whose works present conflicting themes of Afrocentricity, blanqueamiento, accommodation and resistance. They also note the role of hegemonic discourses that promote white supremacy and accommodation, and practices that repress and punish Afrocentric cultural expression and resistance.

Contributors to this anthology use multidisciplinary approaches to their exploration of Black literary works in Latin/Caribbean context, beginning with Pettway's critical reading of the 1844 Cuban colonial "*Sentencia*." This official Spanish government document legitimates the torture of thousands and execution of hundreds of free and enslaved "mixed" and black insurgents who had, accordingly, "seduced each other" into this revolt. Reading "between the lines" Pettway analyzes as "spoken word" the loyalty oath that boldly Africanized Catholic rituals and painted Jesus black as insurgents swore loyalty to each other, inspired by Haiti, and swore resistance against whites to the death.

Ryan presents the development of community based cultural production as the Black Press in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Cuba published poetry that spoke to and gave voice to a community conceived in racial terms. While the poems selected for discussion often acknowledged slavery, they do so without directly confronting white Cubans. Ryan asserts they are silent on persistent oppression; instead they exhort Afro-Cubans in matters of values, cater to white fears of African cultural practices by equating these with primitivism, and urge improvement through education and allegiance to a common culture with whites based on brotherly love. This discourse claiming interracial brotherhood and solidarity despite segregation, repression and discrimination became part of the national narrative.

Casamayor-Cisneros (translated by Burdette) asserts that the "New Man" envisioned in Cuban revolutionary doctrine is conceived as beyond racial and cast in nationalist terms reflecting solidarity and support for the revolution. Fraternity and solidarity are reflected in

novels with themes of interracial love and the child of such unions represents the success of the revolution as one beyond race. This theme prevails in the post-revolutionary cinematic productions. While the Black Cuban is present, they are not embedded in a discourse about race and racism. Against a hegemony that promotes a colorblind Cuban society, Blacks are still visible despite mestizaje visions. For late 20<sup>th</sup> Century documentarians Sara Gomez and Guillen Landrian cinematographers, Black marginality is not resolved by the revolution. As a result, both experienced the censorship of their works and remained unrecognized for their contributions until the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Rizo examines realist “Afro-Hispanic” drama at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century turning to Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Equatorial Guinea to explore the treatment of Blacks in a transnational, globalized context. These dramas center on community but highlight state and global power relations that impact Afrodescendant peoples’ everyday lives. For Rizo (84), these dramatic works are grounded in what Branche calls a *malungaje poetics*, one that contests blanqueamiento but still eschews what Branche calls “narrow Afro-centric perspectives.” Rizo heralds the dramatist Duncan, whose *afrorealism* incorporates the voices and symbolic culture of the African diaspora, as well as other contemporary dramatists whose revelation of the everyday experiences and conditions of diverse communities, not just Afro-Latinos, reveals power relations at work in their lives. These works confront the marginalization of people by class, race and ethnicity and connect the power plays of national elites to global forces of capitalism and neocolonial dominance.

Jaramillo (translated by Freeman) offers an examination of Columbian Theater through her treatment of *Kilele*, a dramatization of the massacre at Bojaya of dozens of Afro Columbian in a church. Caught between two military forces, both Afro-Colombians and indigenous people were killed or displaced. Testimonios were collected to be dramatized in *Kilele*. These reveal the enduring trauma of the massacre and preserve the collective memories of the people.

Feracho calls attention to contemporary Black Latina writers who contest imperialism and patriarchy. She uses Boyce Davis’ concept of “uprising textualities,” to describe how Black Latina writers create spaces for resistance against master narratives. Angelyn Michelle notion of “liberatory narratives” guides her analysis of how these writers engage women’s experiences of enslavement and its enduring legacy. Reading writers from Cuba, Ecuador and Puerto Rico, Feracho discusses stories of individual migrations and collective memories of slavery that articulate the struggle for women’s civil rights in these postcolonial nations. Their biographies and historical novels align with Black American women writers who challenge the masculine gaze, assert standpoints based in women’s everyday experiences, and insist on an oppositional consciousness that attends to race, gender, sexuality and class. In these works, women recount rape and sexual abuse but also highlight their agency as they resist oppression in slavery and beyond, fighting for their freedom alongside male partners or in defiance of them. Feracho uncovers the writers’ attention to African epistemologies and cultural practices that fuel their protagonists’ resistance. The body itself is a site for the contestation of power and for reclamation as Black Latinas articulate struggles for autonomy.

The “woman of the night” is celebrated in Branche’s reading of Mayra Santos Febres’s novel, *Nuestra Señora de la Noche*, that centers on Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, madam

of two famous brothels that catered to the Puerto Rican elite. For Branche, Santos Febres' treatment breaks with earlier depictions of Isabel as a threat to the whitening/purification of Puerto Rico and the modern family that was idealized as the heart of the nation. Branche finds that Santos Febres' attention to Isabel's earlier life is significant for its revelation of the struggles and resilience of poor people of color and significance of Black kinship networks. Black women's circumstances are depicted through their superexploitation as domestic workers and subjugation to patriarchy, the Church, sexual abuse and objectification. They represent all that is evil, bad and sexual but for Branche (167) the novel presents "another *gran familia*" in contrast to the white patriarchal middle class family that is idealized.

Iifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo argues that the identification of race, racism and racial solidarity is central to Afro Latino writers' decisions about how they use language. She looks at two Panamanians: Carlos Russell, a poet and Panamanian transplant from Brooklyn, and Danger Man, a hip hop artist, as she explores how and when they use West Indian vernacular, standard forms of English and Spanish, and Black American lingo. Carlos Russell's poetry uses words that reflect the multiplicity of Panamanian identity and protest racism. Danger Man's lyrics include Jamaican patois, Spanish and Black American speech based on his Jamaican-Panamanian identity and his identification of hip hop. Nwankwo demonstrates how both artists also articulate masculinity based on material possession, sexualization of women, and homophobia.

In "Racial Consciousness, Place and Identity in Selected Afro-Mexican Oral Poems," Paulette Ramsay suggests a recent change in the erasure of African roots in Mexico as she analyzes three poems that express racial solidarity, arguing that these writers locate Afro-Mexican heritage in particular places that are featured in their works. The poetry she shares celebrates blackness: the blessing of being raised by the black mother, choosing black over white lovers, celebrating the beauty of Blackness and the cultural practices and places with which it is associated.

Melva Persico examines "Afro-Uruguayan Culture and Legitimation," asserting that the presence of a Black literary culture in early 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Uruguay does not assure its marginalization which echoes and reinforces the marginalization of the people. This is apparent in the national preference for cultural performance over written word, and the relegation of performance to folkloric status by the hegemonic culture. *Candombe*, an African based musical performance has become central to Uruguayan culture after its suppression in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but is commercialized and contained, reinforcing stereotypes that relegate Black culture to song and dance. Persico also discusses two Black women poets, Christina Cabral and Graciela Leguismon, whose work contests colonization, reveals the social conditions of Blacks, remembers genocide of the indigenous and enslavement of Africans, and derides the repression of cultural expression. She asserts that they, among other Afro Uruguayan writers, have proven their cultural capital but it is unclear if they will remain marginalized or achieve recognition just to be commoditized like the *Candombe*.

Niyi Afolabi declares the myth of Brazilian racial democracy and situates racial mixing in African enslavement before turning to Abdias do Nascimento's notion of *Quilombismo* (237), "an Afro-Brazilian alternative that will not only unite all Brazilians but also give Afro-Brazilians their due in the articulation of Brazilian citizenship." Do

Nascimento argues for an Afro-Brazilian Memory Week to celebrate Blacks' contributions, commemorate Quilombo maroon societies, and address the "amnesia" of the nation. He is joined by others who want to recover African heritage and celebrate Blackness. Afolabi looks at Afro-Brazilian poets including Oliveira Silveira, Lepe Coreia, Jamu Mika, Abelardo Rodrigues, and Carlose de Assupcao, all described as marginalized. Their poems address Brazilian racism in Brazil and racial democracy as Silveira writes, "Existent racism, nonexistent racism...such is Brazil." Their marginalization reflects that of Black and indigenous populations; their quests for recognition remain, as Afolabi notes, elusive.

In the final chapter Catherine Walsh and Juan Garcia Salazar examine voices of resistance and resilience speaking against the Ecuadorian state's erasure of their existence, as Afro-descendant peoples pass stories from generation to generation to transfer knowledge. Juan Garcia thinks the contemporary generation has lost the will to listen because of schooling that reproduces their subordination. Just as the State dictates schooling, collective memories expressed through Juan Garcia's grandfather Zenon's writings suggest the state dictates the rights of Blacks and their marginalization. Against this they assert the need to present their conditions and worldview central to their contemporary existence as Afro-Ecuadorians.

Together these critical essays form a vital contribution to the scholarship on Afro-descendant peoples and the enduring legacy of slavery in the Caribbean and Latin America. Through a brilliant series of creative excavations—of confessions, dramatic works, documentaries, biographies, poetry, novels and hip hop—this anthology covers significant themes centering on race, gender, culture, and identity for Afro-descendant peoples in the region. Additionally, some essays reveal what bell hooks called the view from the margins as those most vulnerable—Black women—contest power relations through slavery and colonialism, nation-building and globalization, violence and containment. Throughout the collection we bear witness to the resilience of some of the most oppressed in the Western Hemisphere as they avow African heritage and cultural sovereignty.