

IDENTIFYING AND EXPRESSING
THE SELF:
Recent Studies in Afro-Hispanic and Lusophone Literatures

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AGAINST THE AMERICAN GRAIN: MYTH AND HISTORY IN WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, JAY WRIGHT, AND NICOLAS GUILLEN. By VERA M. KUTZINSKI. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987. Pp. 298. \$29.50.)

BECOMING TRUE TO OURSELVES: CULTURAL DECOLONIZATION AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE LITERATURE OF THE PORTUGUESE-SPEAKING WORLD. By MARIA LUISA NUNES. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1987. Pp. 94. \$29.95.)

BLACK LITERATURE AND HUMANISM IN LATIN AMERICA. By RICHARD L. JACKSON. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988. Pp. 166. \$23.00.)

RACE AND COLOR IN BRAZILIAN LITERATURE. By DAVID BROOKSHAW. (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press. Pp. 348. \$32.50.)

TREADING THE EBONY PATH: IDEOLOGY AND VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY AFRO-COLOMBIAN PROSE FICTION. By MARVIN A. LEWIS. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987. Pp. 142. \$19.00.)

The appearance of *nègritude* in the 1930s presented a new perspective on Africa and those of African heritage. It was accompanied by a surprising phenomenon: artists of African descent extolled the values of their culture while criticizing the social circumstances in which they had to live. They expressed dissatisfaction with and hatred for the Eurocentric colonial system forced upon them. *Nègriste* poets such as Aimé Césaire, León Damas, and Léopold Senghor, all natives of Francophone countries, voiced their rage toward the colonizers but in the language of the dominant culture. Having lost the languages of their ancestral home (or in the case of Senghor, finding it socially unacceptable to use the native language), they had no alternative. In an effort to avoid being assimilated, they used the myths and image of Africa in their works.

The pursuit of self-identity and its literary expression is explored in each of the books to be reviewed here. Many of the writers whose works appear in these studies are of African descent, and all of them live or have lived in former colonies of European nations.

Decolonized and Noncolonized Literature

In America the dehumanizing experience of slavery prevented blacks from writing about themselves. First illiteracy and then lack of interest on the part of the predominantly white reading public impeded the production of black literature. In Africa European intervention destroyed civilizations that were centuries-old and imposed colonial governments on indigenous ruling organizations. This kind of loss of language and culture within a colonial system automatically creates a problem in expressing any type of non-European experience. But as the negriste poets discovered, a new form of self-expression can be achieved without total linguistic and literary dependence on Europe.

Maria Luisa Nunes's *Becoming True to Ourselves: Cultural Decolonization and National Identity in the Literature of the Portuguese-Speaking World* and Vera Kutzinski's *Against the American Grain: Myth and History in William Carlos Williams, Jay Wright, and Nicolás Guillén* both analyze the process of the decolonization and ultimately the nationalization of literature. Nunes examines Lusophone novels and poetry from the perspective of the social sciences and feminist criticism. Her selection of literature from Portugal, Brazil, the Cape Verde Islands, Guinea Bissau, São Tomé, Príncipe, Mozambique, and Angola provides a wide range of comparison among countries, which have all been dominated in some way by a foreign culture. Similarly, Kutzinski explores the literary works of three poets who achieved alternatives to traditional European literary forms in relating their New World experiences. Both critics emphasize the emergence of national and personal identities in the literature mentioned in their studies.

Nunes's inclusion of Portuguese women in a discussion of decolonization is a welcome addition to research on Lusophone literature. She enumerates the reactions to female victimization, which can all be related to colonization: identification with the oppressor, identification of self as the victim, repudiation of the role of victim, and reintegration of self. The search for the self appears as a constant throughout the variety of works examined in *Becoming True to Ourselves*. Even Portugal, despite being a European country, had problems with identity. Often considered a cultural colony of France and an economic colony of England, the "mother country" eventually found its own mode of self-expression. But those who expressed themselves in the written word in Portuguese tended to be male, and their works reflected the values of a patriarchal society. When literature by Portuguese women did appear, it emphasized the affirmation of self. Although such affirmation was made difficult by the pressures women experienced in a male-dominated society, it was occasionally achieved in books like *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters*.¹

In each of the other countries discussed, whose histories, political developments, and cultural distinctions are well outlined by Nunes, a

national identity emerged in the literature through the use of creative linguistic techniques and strong images of resistance to oppression. The result is that although Portugal's literature was once the cultural model for its colonies, today it is influenced by the works of Brazilians. In the arena of world politics, Portugal's African colonies have affected the "mother country's" political destiny. These examples of shifting realms of influence illustrate Nunes's concluding observation that cultural exchange functions "like oxygen among nations" (p. 81).

Cultural exchange is also emphasized in Kutzinski's excellent *Against the American Grain: Myth and History in William Carlos Williams, Jay Wright, and Nicolás Guillén*. Each of these three poets has supplanted a Eurocentric literary tradition with an alternate New World tradition. In the United States (Williams's and Wright's country of origin) and Cuba (Guillén's homeland), the historical perspectives of England and Spain were brought to bear in recording their experiences in America. Eventually, however, each former colony developed its particular myth of origin, culture, and national aspirations. In a detailed analysis of selected works of the three poets, Kutzinski describes the gradual destruction of Old World canons in America.

Anglo-American William Carlos Williams sought to debunk America's Puritan heritage. His controversial work *In the American Grain* subverted the "official language" found in American histories. To replace it, he created a new language that drew on his own linguistic ambivalence as the son of a Spanish-speaking mother and on his desire to tell the "unofficial story" of America.

Afro-American poet Jay Wright finds his mode of self-expression through manipulating African myths and restructuring history. Turning to his origins, he has also utilized languages reflecting different cultures to recreate the other history of the New World. Kutzinski views Wright's *Dimensions of History* as the work in which linguistic and cultural diversity serve to invent a new vision of America.

The image of the New World, specifically Cuba, once again emerges as an amalgamation of languages and experiences. Kutzinski examines Nicolás Guillén's technique of inverting the canon, or turning the "official history" inside out. The process of carnivalization offers the reader a completely different version of Spain's colonizing efforts in the New World.² Kutzinski's examination of Guillén's earlier poetry, which came out of the *negrista* movement,³ yields few new insights, but her detailed analysis of *El diario que a diario* offers an excellent interpretation of the Cuban poet's most daring work. She perceives this book, published in 1972, as an echoing of *algarabía*, the noisy chatter commonly found in open-air markets.⁴ Kutzinski draws parallels between Guillén's often unintelligible language in *El diario que a diario* and the chaotic linguistic experimentation in Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Tres tristes tigres*. When

contrasted with this other eclectic Cuban work, Guillén's innovations can be thoroughly appreciated within the context of the Boom and *negrismo*.⁵

The discoveries of unique identities, discerned through the often painful passage from colony to nation to a reintegrated self, appear in the literatures of Lusophone, Anglophone, and Spanish-speaking countries. In all instances, the literary canon is left behind because it no longer provides sufficient means for self-expression.

Race and Color in Latin American Literature

Negrismo flourished during the 1920s and 1930s in many Spanish-speaking Latin American countries. Negrista literature, like nègriste works, depicted black life and often registered strong protest against the oppression under which Afro-Hispanics lived. Unlike the Francophone literature of the same period, however, negrista poetry and prose were usually written by whites. Poets like Luis Palés Matos of Puerto Rico, Manuel del Cabral of the Dominican Republic, and Emilio Ballagas of Cuba sought to depict black life in unusual meters and phrases that sounded "African."⁶ Novelists like Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos and Cuban Alejo Carpentier researched and wrote about traditional ceremonies performed in their countries' black communities.⁷

The question of authenticity inevitably arises in any discussion of negrista literature. Is literature written about Spanish speakers of African descent more "authentic," more verisimilar, or more moving than that written by whites? This question is addressed by Marvin Lewis in *Treading the Ebony Path: Ideology and Violence in Contemporary Afro-Colombian Prose Fiction* and by Richard Jackson in *Black Literature and Humanism in Latin America* in their examinations of Afro-Spanish literature. Jackson's opinion on authenticity appears in the introduction of Lewis's book and serves as the theoretical base of the authors' shared critical outlooks: "In the first place, there is a corpus of literature by 'realistically committed' black authors in Latin America, and since this is black literature written 'from within,' it is more authentic than the literary expression of concerned white humanists who, however sincere and humanistic in their advocacy, are still on the outside looking in" (p. 3). Lewis analyzes the works of five Afro-Colombian "insiders." While commenting on the literary merit of their fiction, he also explores the relationship between political ideologies and the depiction of violence in their works. The violence in the novels of Afro-Colombians Arnoldo Palacios, Carlos Arturo Truque, Jorge Artel, and Juan and Manuel Zapata Olivella represent two types: vertical and social violence directed against the society that created the situation; and horizontal and individual violence directed at a friend or relative.⁸

Lewis's hypothesis holds that a sense of thematic and structural continuity exists in the literature of the aforementioned Afro-Colombian

writers, although they are separated in time and space. To prove his point, he uses an approach combining characteristics of formalist, culturalist, and historical-dialectic criticism. Consideration of each author's ethnic and political orientation is necessary to understand each one's methods of expressing the violent reality that all of them have witnessed since about 1948. The personal interpretations of *la especificidad latinoamericana*⁹ as outlined in *Treading the Ebony Path* include physical and psychological violence. Lewis concludes that all the writers express disappointment with the status quo in their country "with sentiments ranging from resignation to warfare" (p. 120).

The committed nature of not only Afro-Colombian literature but Afro-Latino literature in general is the major focus of Richard Jackson's *Black Literature and Humanism in Latin America*. In his opinion, literature by an Afro-Spanish writer presupposes a committed, humanistic viewpoint. Within the context of his study, Jackson defines humanism as "an attitude of concern for the welfare and dignity of human beings, especially 'marginal' ones, and for the problems that beset them in this life" (p. xiii). Afro-Hispanic novelists and poets who have written from a negrista perspective have manifested this attitude at one time or another in their works. In a wide-ranging survey of Afro-Cuban, Afro-Ecuadorean, Afro-Colombian, Afro-Panamanian, and Afro-Peruvian literature, Jackson evaluates the symbols and characterizations that express *la especificidad latinoamericana*.

In the chapter entitled "The Shango Saga," Jackson analyzes the most impressive symbol of all—Changó.¹⁰ Manuel Zapata Olivella's epic novel on this subject manifests the humanistic perspective described throughout *Black Literature and Humanism in Latin America*. This Afro-Colombian author wrote *Changó, el gran putas* in order to present history from the point of view of black people. This total commitment to narrating the history of those who were considered for centuries to be "gente sin historia" indicates the profoundly humanistic nature of the novel.

In Jackson's opinion, novels like *Changó* and many other texts discussed in his study should be evaluated by using humanistic criticism. Citing new publications in the fields of Afro-American Literature and Black Studies, Jackson stresses that black literature should be read and critiqued in a humanistic context. He observes that "the humanist critic believes that preoccupation with the moral and human content of literature is not incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment" (p. 123). When presented with such a wide variety of literature whose purpose is to present the human experience "from below" and "from within," movement toward a human-centered poetics certainly seems in order (p. 120).

Latin American specificity is not expressed exclusively in Spanish. The world's largest Portuguese-speaking nation constitutes half of South America. Brazil has a reality of its own that forms a large part of the African-Latin American experience. David Brookshaw examines the Afro-Brazilian presence in the national literature in his exhaustive study, *Race*

and *Color in Brazilian Literature*. First published in Portuguese under the same title, Brookshaw's study goes beyond delineating black stereotypes in Brazilian literature. By placing nineteenth- and twentieth-century works in their historical contexts, he traces the images of Afro-Brazilians found in literature by white authors and by those of African descent. The works analyzed reflect Afro-Brazilians' long journey from slavery to freedom. Brookshaw demonstrates through close readings of a wide variety of literary selections that the journey may not yet be completed.

Two Afro-Brazilian images prevailed in abolitionist literature: the Demon Slave (the runaway) and the Faithful Slave. On the whole, the black slave woman was portrayed as noble and long-suffering, as in José de Alencar's play *Mãe* (1862). The emergence of Naturalism revitalized abolitionist literature. Herbert Spencer's theories prevailed, contributing to the negative image of blacks as intellectually and morally inferior. In works of the latter part of the nineteenth century, former slaves of African descent were portrayed as lacking in redeeming qualities. Novels such as *O Cortiço* (1890) by Aluísio Azevedo and *Bom Crioulo* (1895) by Adolfo Caminha stressed the "bad" nature of blacks and mulattos. During this period of Brazilian literary history, Afro-Brazilian characters were "animalized," a trait visible in the social novels of Jorge Amado and José Lins do Rego.

It is understandable that white authors' works about Afro-Brazilian life would be lacking in authenticity as defined and discussed in the other books reviewed here. Authors like Jorge Amado, writing "from without," used Afro-Brazilian culture primarily for its exoticism and eroticism. More surprising is the finding that the works of some Brazilian writers of African heritage also lack authenticity in depicting black life. The attention given to these authors makes *Race and Color in Brazilian Literature* a truly outstanding study. Brookshaw analyzes literary works by frequently studied writers (like Machado de Assis and João Cruz e Sousa) and writers whose works have not been thoroughly critiqued (Anajá Caetano and Nataniel Dantas). He discusses three categories of literary production by Afro-Brazilians: escape from racial origins (reflected in an erudite literary style), humor and pathos, and protest and satire. These divisions take into account the question of whether an Afro-Brazilian writer can describe black life more effectively than someone of strictly European descent. In nineteenth-century Brazilian works, little distinction can be made with regard to authenticity between black and white depictions of Afro-Brazilian reality. In twentieth-century prose, however, writers like Lima Barreto and Deoscóredes dos Santos of the *quilombista* poets have insisted on including painful and personal experiences in their literature to ensure complete authenticity.

Brookshaw's inclusion of an appendix entitled "African Slavery in Brazil" and numerous race-based population tables are helpful additions

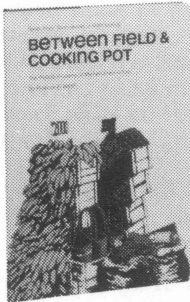
for considering the historical context of his study. In the current period, Brookshaw perceives a new sense of self in Afro-Brazilian literature:

The social integration of blacks in a spirit in which they do not lose their identity or self-respect, and the formation of a mestizo nation in which all ethnic elements can take pride in their roots, are the principal concerns of Afro-Brazilians in literature, whether creative or polemical. . . . Hence the ideal of a black-based "mesticismo," a *Negritude* of synthesis, which calls for a democratization of cultural and social values in order to create an integrated, more egalitarian nation, in which all its inhabitants, whether black or white, may free themselves from the false values of "branqueamento." (P. 306)

The search for identity appears as a principal theme throughout world literature. But for writers who are part of the African diaspora and for those who have been forced into dependency, the exploration of this theme can lead to liberation. Once free, these authors can speak in their own voices without hesitation or shame, leaving behind the traditional, "proper" modes of expression peculiar to the formerly dominant culture.

NOTES

1. This collaborative effort by Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta, and Maria Velho da Costa contains letters, poetry, and prose. Nunes considers it to be "the most important piece of writing within the context of feminism to have appeared" in Portuguese literature (p. 27).
2. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, translated by R. W. Rotsel (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973).
3. Generally speaking, negrista poetry depicts Afro-Hispanic life. A detailed discussion of alternative descriptive terms for this type of poetry is found in Marvin Lewis's *Afro-Hispanic Poetry, 1940-1980: From Slavery to "Negritud" in South American Verse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983).
4. Vera Kutzinski discussed the origin of the word *algarabía*: "it is likely that *algarabía* was associated with the oriental bazaars that came to be a familiar institution in the large, commercial centers of medieval Spain. *Algarabía* probably referred to the tumultuous chaos of those bazaars. . . [and thus] signifies the intense disorder of these markets represented by the confusing simultaneity of voices filling the air" (p. 181).
5. See José Donoso, *The Boom in Spanish American Literature: A Personal History*, translated by Gregory Kolovakos (New York: Columbia University Press and the Center for Inter-American Relations, 1977); and Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann, *Into the Mainstream: Conversations with Latin American Writers* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).
6. Distinctive features of negrista poetry are the use of rhythms reminiscent of African drumbeats, onomatopoeia, neologisms, and Afro-Latino dialect, as evidenced in the final stanza of Luis Palés Matos's "Danza negra": "Calabó y bambú. / Bambú and calabó. / El Gran Cocoroco dice: tu-cu-tú. / La Gran Cocoroca dice: to-co-tó."
7. See Alejo Carpentier, *Ecué-Yamba-O* (Buenos Aires: Octavio Sello, 1977); and Rómulo Gallegos, *Pobre negro* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1971, 4th edition).
8. Marvin Lewis takes these categories of violence from Ariel Dorfman's *Imaginación y violencia en América* (Santiago: Editorial Universitaria, 1970).
9. Richard Jackson identifies "Latin American specificity" with African and indigenous cultures.
10. In Yoruba mythology, Changó (also Sangó or Xangó) is the son of Yemayá and Orungán. In the syncretic religions of Brazil and parts of Spanish America, he is identified with Saint Barbara and is venerated mainly as a god of war.



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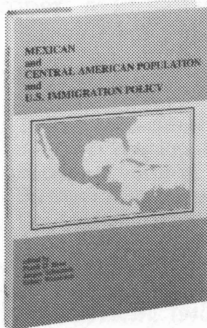
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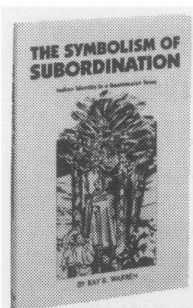
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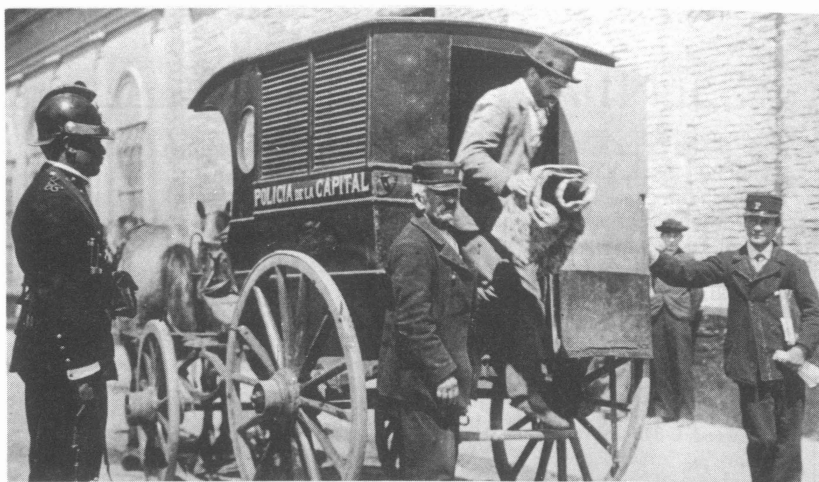
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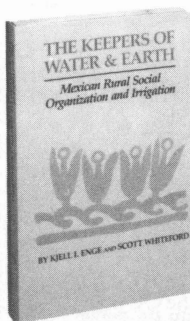
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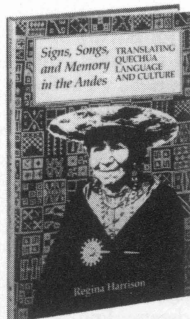
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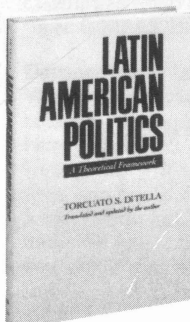
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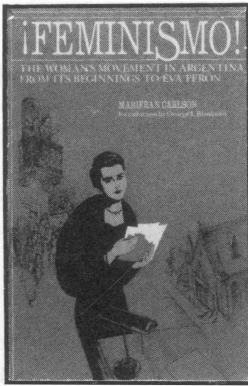
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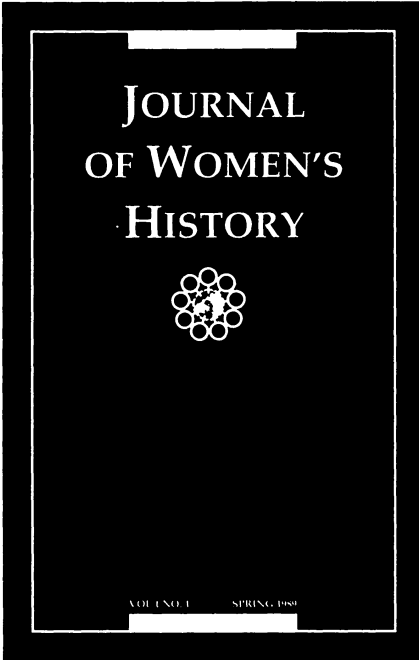
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