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The Poetics and Politics of Afro-Cuban Carnival

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Anderson, Thomas F. *Carnival and National Identity in the Poetry of Afrocubanismo*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 341 pp.

The closing decade of the last century saw the publication of a number of groundbreaking studies that examine, from various perspectives and through multiple methodologies, the important role that race has played in Cuban cultural history and in the formation of a modern Cuban national identity. To be sure, titles such as Vera Kutzinski's *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (1994), Aline Helg's *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (1995), Robin Moore's *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanism and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940* (1997), and Louis Pérez's *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (1999) – just to name a few – have by now become required reading for anyone interested in questions of Cuban cultural history and national identity formation, as well as for those who work in the broader fields of Afro-Caribbean and Caribbean studies. The momentum has continued in the opening years of the current century, during which academic authors from many fields have published significant studies that further explore the importance of race in the construction of modern Cuba. Among the books that have been most useful in my own teaching and research on the subject have been Alejandro de la Fuente's *A Nation for All: Race, politics, and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (2001), Luis Duno-Gottberg's *Solventando diferencias: la ideología del mestizaje en Cuba* (2003), David H. Brown's *The Light Inside: Abakuá Society and Cuban Cultural Identity* (2003) and *Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion* (2003), Alejandra Bronfman's *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship, and Race in Cuba, 1902-1040* (2004), Christine Ayorinde's *Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity* (2004), Miguel Arnedo-Gómez's *Writing Rumba: The Afrocubanista Movement in Poetry* (2006), and Ivor Miller's *The Voice of the Leopard: African Secret Societies and Cuba* (2009). Indeed, my recent study *Carnival and National Identity in the Poetry of Afrocubanismo* (2011) benefitted greatly from the works listed here, and would have been very difficult, first to conceive and then to write, without many of them.

Emily A. Maguire's *Racial Experiments in Cuban Literature and Ethnography* is an ambitious work that follows in the wake of the studies mentioned here, at the same time that it breaks some significant new ground. As I was reading the book, it struck me a number of times that it was unfortunate that it had not been published a bit earlier, as certain parts of it would have been quite useful for my recent book, which considers representations of Afro-Cuban carnival celebrations in works by Fernando Ortiz, Nicolás Guillén, Alejo Carpentier, and other major Cuban literary figures. Overall, Maguire's study is well written (despite some stylistic tics, like an unusual proliferation of parenthetical remarks), and it offers some new insights into several classic works of modern Cuban literature, especially Fernando Ortiz's *Los negros brujos*, and Lydia Cabrera's two collections of so-called *cuentos negros*. Like many critics before her, Maguire demonstrates how blackness was seen by Cuban intellectuals as both a boon and a bane, as it were, since it was considered to be a contributing factor to Cuba's uniqueness at the same time that it was partially responsible for the island's reputation as an underdeveloped, inferior, and non-modern nation (4). Focusing principally on four major Cuban intellectuals – Lydia Cabrera, Alejo Carpentier, Nicolás Guillén and Fernando Ortiz – Maguire sets out to demonstrate how these “artist-ethnographers,” as she refers to them, borrowed from established literary traditions, and from the fields of ethnographic and cultural studies to produce a series of texts that served “to create and buttress a particular idea of Cuba as a nation”(4). Maguire's book is constructed, as she notes in the introduction, as a series of counterpoints. If we understand “counterpoint” to denote two musical melodies played in conjunction, it seems like an apt term to describe her approach to literary and textual analysis, since throughout her study she explores both the semantic and syntactic aspects – the “ethnographic spirit” and the “experimental sensibility” – of a particular corpus of Cuban literature. But Maguire's study can also be seen as a series of counterpoints in which she at once places the work of Lydia Cabrera in dialogue with and in contrast to that of her three Cuban contemporaries as well as the African-American writer and ethnographer Zora Neale Hurston, whose life and work she considers in the final chapter.

In the informative introduction – which draws on previous studies by Louis Pérez, Alejandro de la Fuente, Robin Moore, among others – Maguire skillfully traces the study of Afro-Cuban culture from the mid 19th through the mid 20th centuries, focusing on the notion that “while Afro-Cuban culture was in a position to contribute significantly to the idea of Cubanness being

constructed by the island's intellectuals, it was also a problematic, stigmatized, element" (1). As Maguire states in both the introduction and at the outset of Chapter 1, "Locating Afro-Cuban Religion: Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera," the principal aim of the first chapter is to trace the representations of Afro-Cuban culture in Fernando Ortiz's *Hampa afrocubana: Los negros brujos* (1906) and Lydia Cabrera's *El Monte* (1954), two "ostensibly ethnographic texts" (31) that, as Maguire points out, served as figurative bookends to the study of Afro-Cuban culture during the Republic. At the same time, Maguire notes that she will consider these texts in light of others by the same authors, namely Ortiz's *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y del azúcar* (1940) and Cabrera's *Cuentos negros de Cuba* (1936). This is a quite a tall order, to be sure, and one that would be difficult for any critic to fulfill, especially in the space of a 30-page chapter. Maguire's discussion of *Los negros brujos* is well informed and quite illuminating at times, especially in terms of how she relates Ortiz's first major publication to Cabrera's crowning achievement. She does an admirable job, for example, of demonstrating how both Ortiz and Cabrera used ethnographic narrative techniques to discuss blackness, and she likewise successfully outlines one of a key differences between *Los negros brujos* and *El Monte*: that is, that while Ortiz exposes the mysteries of Afro-Cuban religions largely out of a desire to convince practitioners to become better integrated into "modern society," Cabrera demonstrates in *El Monte* how practitioners had managed to adapt themselves and their religious practices to the modern, urban environment of mid-20th century Havana. Despite this and other notable differences that Maguire points out, she is careful to stress that "it is treacherously facile to position Cabrera and her work as essentially 'anti-Ortiz'" (61), a point that I think is especially important to consider when reading the following chapters. I found Maguire's discussion of *El Monte* in this and other chapters to be somewhat disappointing largely because of what I perceived as a lack of deep analysis and close reading of this very complex text. Several times in her study Maguire correctly points out how difficult it is for an outsider to read and analyze *El Monte*, perhaps inadvertently underscoring, as it were, a principal reason why she and other critics before her have had a difficult time shedding significant new light on Cabrera's masterwork.

In Chapter 2, "Beyond Bongos and Montmartre: Lydia Cabrera and Alejo Carpentier Imagining Blackness," Maguire explores "the encounter of an ethnographic perspective and avant-garde aesthetics through a reading of the symbolic function of blackness" (26) in the early novels of Alejo Carpentier - *Écue-Yamba-Ó* (1933) and *El reino de este mundo* (1949) – and

the short stories of Lydia Cabrera. Maguire clearly demonstrates here how both Carpentier and Cabrera drew on personal ethnographic research in their textual construction of blackness and in their representation of Afro-Cuban culture for local and European audiences. Much like the first chapter, this one offers a number of valuable insights into the authors and their works, but in the thirteen brief subsections, Maguire tends to skirt over some rather important issues. For example, in one brief subsection (just over one page) with a rather tantalizing title – “The Photographs: *Documents* in novel form” (emphasis is Maguire’s) – the author brings up the very important issue of “the unusual photographs that accompany [the first edition of *Écue-Yamba-Ó*” (77). However, she barely addresses the many fascinating questions that the photos bring up: why are there so many images related to Santería in a novel that focuses largely on Abakuá traditions? Where did the photos come from? Why are there no captions or descriptions? Did Carpentier himself understand the disconnect between the photos and the contents of the chapters in which they are included? Another aspect of Maguire’s discussion of *Écue-Yamba-Ó* that I found to be a bit problematic was her apparent lack of familiarity with some of the novel’s key Afro-Cuban terms and with important secondary sources. For example, to illustrate that Menegildo Cué’s name “suggests a kind of African authenticity,” Maguire relies on Jossianna Arroyo’s questionable assertion that the surname Cué is a “derivation of the Efik term ecué (sacred son of the palm).” This, Arroyo and Maguire claim, “connect[s] the family origins to one of the Santería religion’s sacred trees” (76). This is problematic for a number of reasons, but I will only mention the most obvious: Ékue (sometimes written ekué or ecué) is a consecrated Abakuá drum imbued with spiritual energies. As both David Brown and Ivor Miller explain, this sacred *fundamento* is “the epicenter of Abakuá activity” (Miller 216) and its name comes from Ékpe, the Efik term for leopard. It is clear that Carpentier – who, despite using the term in the title of his novel, does not define the term in the accompanying glossary – uses it with these commonly known meanings in mind. In her otherwise fascinating discussion of Cabrera’s tale, “Los compadres,” Maguire again treats the author’s use of “unfamiliar” Afro-Cuban terminology rather awkwardly. After citing lines from a song that appears in the text – “Saúla bómbo, saúla bómbodil,/Saúla bómbo, saúlas, ¡bobo se va! – she observes that “A speaker not familiar with Lucumí (the Yoruba dialect spoken in Cuba) will have no idea what this says, although it can be inferred by the use of the Spanish ‘bobo’. . . that the song is about someone

stupid” (94). While such an inference may indeed be accurate, most readers would expect a more sophisticated and useful explanation of the song and its unfamiliar terminology.

In the next chapter, “The National Art of Signifyin(g): Nicolás Guillén and Lydia Cabrera,” Maguire adds a Cuban twist to Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s concept of Signifyin(g) – which she refers to as “*choteo*-like verbal play” (106) – in her analysis of how race is used rhetorically and structurally in Lydia Cabrera’s short stories and in poems by Nicolás Guillén. As Maguire puts it in the Introduction, “referring both to African-derived wordplay and to strategies of literary intertextuality, I show how Cabrera and Guillén improvise on Afro-Cuban culture at a structural level, playing with genres such as the *son* and the folktale, to make Signifyin(g) function not just as a racial strategy, but also as a national one” (26). In this chapter Maguire successfully demonstrates how, in their poems and stories respectively, Guillén and Cabrera delve into questions of Cuban identity as much through formal experimentation as through the exploration of new ways of presenting Afro-Cuban subjectivity. I found Maguire’s discussion of Cabrera’s *Cuentos negros de Cuba* in this chapter to be quite useful, especially in terms of how she underscores the importance of Cabrera’s consistent affirmation of the racial and the national identity of her stories – that is, that they are Afro-Cuban, not African, creations. When considering several of Nicolás Guillén’s *son* poems in light of Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s concept of Signifyin(g), Maguire correctly contends that these important early texts “mark an important shift in the way blackness was represented in Cuba” (112). Maguire sheds some new light on the much-studied poems from *Motivos de son* (1930), *Sóngoro cosongo* (1931), and *West Indies, Ltd.* (1934) that she considers, but there are a couple of oversights in the chapter that detract somewhat from its value. Her reading of “Negro bembón,” for example, is not served well by her choice to cite Achy Obejas’ translation of the poem (I still prefer Langston Hughes’ and Ben Frederic Carruthers’ 1948 rendition), which inaccurately renders the key line “Caridá te mantiene” as “you live off grace.” Maguire partially makes up for Obejas’ questionable translation by noting, as many readers of the poem already have, that “*Caridá* could either be the name of a woman, or a reference to the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre” (115-16). However, she neither acknowledges Obejas’ odd choice of “grace” with a small “g” (even if her comments about the poem suggest that she would not have translated it that way herself) nor discusses the important issue of the nature of the relationship between Caridad and the poem’s black subject: are they lovers, husband and wife, or is he a pimp and she a prostitute (the reading that I prefer)?

Maguire's discussion of Guillén's sonnet "El abuelo" is also problematic, not because she misinterprets the poem, but rather because she makes much of its ostensible "placement in the collection [*West Indies, Ltd.*], coming as it does between two poems that play directly with Afro-Cuban rhythms; 'Sensemayá' and 'Caminando'" (126). The problem here – as many readers will immediately note – is that "Balada de los dos abuelos," not "El abuelo," occupies this important location in both the first edition of *West Indies, Ltd.* and the subsequent publication of the collection in *Sóngoro cosongo y otros poemas de Nicolás Guillén* (Havana: La Verónica, 1942). In short, it would seem that because "El abuelo" falls between these two poems in *Obra poética* (Havana Letras Cubanas: 1972), the only collection of Guillén's poems cited in Maguire's bibliography, that she assumed that it also occupied that position in the original edition.¹ This would have been of relatively little consequence had it not been for the fact that Maguire places such importance on the poem's position in the text in her analysis of its meaning and significance.

In "Gender, Genre, and Ethnographic Authority: Lydia Cabrera and Zora Neale Hurston," the book's fourth and final chapter, Maguire examines Cuba's "anxiety surrounding national identity and race" (144) in a broader international context through a comparative study of Lydia Cabrera's *El Monte* (1954) and the North American ethnographer, Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935). I concur with James Pancrazio – who is quoted on the back cover of the book – that "Maguire's close readings of women ethnographers [in this chapter] result in a very original approach to dealing with the topic of race and how it overlaps with the categories of gender." Indeed, I think that this is the most useful and compelling chapter of Maguire's book. Much can be learned, for example, from her discussion of the varying ways in which Cabrera and Hurston dealt with the inherent methodological and narrative challenges of ethnography, and her exploration of how Cabrera and Hurston, as both women and scholars, strove to represent minority cultures to their respective national reading publics is enlightening. Notwithstanding its many strengths, this chapter suffers a bit from a problem that I have already raised in my discussion of chapter one: that is, that despite her best efforts Maguire barely scratches the surface of *El Monte*, an extremely challenging work that has received such limited critical attention largely because scholars (or is it just me?) find it so intimidating and overwhelming.

¹ To the best of my knowledge, "El abuelo" was first placed between "Sensemayá" and "Caminando" in *El son entero* (Buenos Aires: Pleamar, 1947. 61-62).

Maguire hits the nail on the head when she emphasizes the difficulties that face the reader and critic of *El Monte* when she makes the following observation: “In the polyphony of its narrative, the density of its construction, the sheer quantity of material presented, and the use of a plethora of technical and religious terms and the African dialects . . . spoken in Cuba, Cabrera’s text is something of a ‘catch-22’; that is, it is impossible for the reader to fully understand the book without understanding much of the material beforehand, yet for an outsider it is only possible to understand the material by reading the book” (169).

In sum, despite some of the shortcomings that I have addressed here, I think Emily Maguire’s *Racial Experiments in Cuban Literature and Ethnography* is a valuable addition to the ever-growing fields of Afro-Cuban, Caribbean, and African Diaspora Studies. Maguire’s book will be useful and attractive to diverse audiences largely because it considers four major Cuban writers of the 20th century, but I think it is most important in terms of its valuable contribution to the serious study of Lydia Cabrera, whose work is singled out as emblematic of the avant-garde and experimental spirit that characterized her formative years as a writer. I believe, furthermore, that the final chapter contains the seeds for a compelling and groundbreaking book-length study of the overlaps of race and gender in the works of Lydia Cabrera and Zora Neale Hurston. I hope that Maguire or some other ambitious scholar considers taking on such a task.