

Afro-Hispanic Literature in the US: Remembering the Past, Celebrating the Present, and Forging a Future

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RESUMO

A proposta deste artigo é apresentar uma visão cronológica da inserção da literatura afro-hispano-americana no meio acadêmico nos Estados Unidos. Discutiremos os primórdios dessa literatura, seu status quo presente e seu futuro como disciplina acadêmica, tomando como marco paradigmático o livro de Richard Jackson, *Black Writers in Latin America*, publicado em 1979.

Palavras chave: Literatura afro-hispânica. Nicolás Guillén. Richard Jackson.

Afro-Hispanic Studies as a discipline is an emerging field in the academic circles in the United States. Suffice it to say, scholars, independent researchers and enthusiasts throughout the world are beginning to render critical approaches to this “darker” boom in Latin American letters. Virtually rendered invisible by the US academy until the 1970s, writing by Latin Americans of African ancestry represented a vacuous space in critical anthologies and literary histories. Mentioned, if anyone, is Nicolás Guillén of Cuba, who for decades represented the entirety of critical and creative writers in Spanish America. At the fore of the literary consciousness of most scholars, the presence of Black writers in Latin America has its genesis in the early twentieth century with the published work of Guillén. However, scholars like Stanley Cyrus, Josephat Kubayanda, Marvin Lewis, Miriam De Costa Willis, Richard Jackson, Shirley Jackson, Edward Mullen, William Luis and others produced seminal scholarship that necessitated a revisionist approach to Latin American literary historiography regarding Black writers and their contributions to the development of national bodies of literature.

The critical work of the aforementioned scholars expanded the imaginary chronological borders that had become the accepted timeframe of the materialization of Black writings, that is to say works by writers of known and acknowledged African ancestry, onto/into the literary canon in the United States. Through linking the beginning of a Black literati and literary tradition in the lower Americas to slavery and its aftermath, the pioneering US scholars began the process of excavating from the dredges of forced interment works that would situate writings by Black Latin American well into the late eighteenth, early nineteenth century.

It is the initial intent of this brief overview to discuss the evolutionary development of an Afro-Latin American literary discourse in the US academy, with Spanish America at the center of consideration. Second, this analysis purposes to offer an abridged survey of the progress that has taken place since the 1970s regarding Afro-Latin American letters. Third, rendered is an approximation of its sustainability as an academic discipline and literary trajectory. Finally, Richard Jackson's *Black Writers in Latin America*, published by the University of New Mexico Press in 1979, will set

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the paradigmatic framework in terms of the distinct developmental phases of Afro-Latin American literature. As a territorial disclaimer, I must mention that although the contribution of Brazilians to Afro-Latin American literature and civilization has a rich historical tradition dating back to the colonial era with Domingas Caldas Barbosa (1748? – 1800), this brief inquiry focuses exclusively on Spanish America.

In his groundbreaking study, *Black Writers in Latin America*, eminent scholar and pioneer in the development of literary criticism in the area of Afro-Hispanic literature, Richard L. Jackson states “the study of Afro-Latin American literature and culture is experiencing its own kind of boom in the seventies”(JACKSON, 1979, p. ix). Borrowing from the categorization of Latin American Literature of the previous decade, Jackson suggests an awakening of interest among, principally, North American scholars in the literary production by writers of African ancestry in Latin America whose works delve into the “darker” revelations of cultural experiences, mainly literary materiality, in *América Latina*.

In the preface of his work and as a testament to the emerging interest in Afro-Hispanic culture and civilization in the US and in Latin America, Jackson chronicles the momentum of this intellectual appeal exhibited by the numerous conferences, colloquia, conventions, symposia, scholarly publications, literary journals and courses at universities during the 1970s. In 1976 alone, Jackson enumerates and I paraphrase, they included the City University of New York symposium on Afro-Hispanic Literature, the emergence in Caracas, Venezuela, of *Cuadernos afro-americanos*, a then, new literary journal of Afro-American studies, and the Congreso de Literatura Afro-Americana held at Florida International University. Jackson continues to mention that the year 1977 witnessed the first-ever congress on Black Culture in the Americas in Cali, Colombia, and the joint conference of the Latin American Studies Association and the African Studies Association held in Houston, Texas (JACKSON, 1979, p. x). As a justification of his so-called “boom” of interest in Afro-Latin American interests, Jackson states:

The big difference now is that more black scholars than ever before are focusing attention on the black experience in Latin America. Furthermore, I believe there is more interest in authentic black literature, that is, literature by blacks in Latin America rather than in Latin American literature simply on black themes. In fact, until recently, one associated black literature in Latin America for the most part with Brazil and the Caribbean; now, however, we are becoming more aware that other Latin American countries, even such “white” ones as Costa Rica and Uruguay, had traditions of black consciousness, some dating back to the nineteenth century and before, that produced black folklore, black newspapers, black journals, black political parties, and black writers (JACKSON, 1979, p. ix-x).

As Jackson articulates clearly, there existed in many Latin American countries a cultural tradition “in black,” which fostered the visibility of blackness and black cultural production. The material cultural products about which he speaks served as the fodder for scholars and researchers during the last three decades of the twentieth century in the United States, and beyond.

During the 1970s and 80s, an increasing number of scholars, principally African Americans, were focusing attention on the black experience in Latin America. Furthermore, their scholarly investigations centered national representations of what they considered “authentic” black literature in Latin America; that is, poetry, novels, essays, short-fiction by blacks in Latin America that centered literarily the experiences of this marginalized group. By focusing on the black writer and on the problem of literary blackness in Latin America, the criticism of early pioneers of the field, as Jackson puts it, facilitated a “better understanding of the ethnicity factor;

that is, of the level of black consciousness” (JACKSON, 1979, p. x) in countries in geographic spaces of the world where the social, historical, and political plight of black communities was silenced or rendered invisible in literature. These trailblazers included Martha Cobb, whose dissertation at Catholic University in 1974 on the Black experience in the poetry of Nicolás Guillén, Jacques Romain, and Langston Hughes provided a critical comparison of Blackness in three Diaspora spaces: Cuba, Haiti and the United States. Antonio Olliz Boyd’s 1975 dissertation from Stanford University compared the Concept of Black Aesthetics in selected works of three Latin American writers: Machado de Assis (Brazil), Nicolás Guillén (Cuba) and Adalberto Ortiz (Ecuador). In 1974, Angela Gilliam’s work on configurations of *Black and White in Latin America* provided critical cultural analysis to understanding the formation of racial identity in Latin America and Richard Jackson’s *The Black Images in Latin American Literature* brought to the fore how major writer presented and represented blacks in literary works. It must be mentioned that the surge or swell of interest in Black Latin America beyond the Caribbean and Brazil, was influenced in part by the momentum of the socio-politics of Blacks in North America, as black grassroots organizing was taking a foothold in Latin America.

Civil Rights and the Black power movements spanning from the 1950s to 1970s in the United States of North America served as a formidable backdrop for the inquiry into global blackness, especially in the Americas. Displeased with the historical plight of post-emancipation Blackness from Cuba and Colombia to Peru, socio-political involvement on the part of Blacks in Latin America was gaining ground. And, as oftentimes, literature is a mimetic, thematic reflection of lived experiences. In so being, works such as Zapata Olivella’s *Pasión vagabunda* (1949) and *He visto la noche* (1953), thematically explored the civil situation of Blacks in the Americas, *He visto* being an exposé on American blackness from Colombia to New York, as the vagabond protagonist meanders the murky socio-political terrain of blackness in various geopolitical spaces in South, Central and North America. In addition, the rich heritage and inclusion of the African-American literary trajectory onto the national literary scene and the rise in scholarship, literary histories, anthologies, and criticism also played an important role in peaking interest in the greater Diaspora in the Americas of budding scholars of languages and literatures in graduate programs throughout the US. By focusing on Black writers and the problems of literary blackness in Latin America, many of the pioneers of Afro-Hispanic literature provided a more in-depth understanding of the cultural intricacies with regard to the metaphysics of race/ethnicity in Latin America. In so doing, presented in Latin American novels, poetry, short fiction, select newspapers and journals was a level of black consciousness that bore witness to black liberation, social protest, black identity, black solidarity, and black collective consciousness in nations thought by many not to have a substantial population of Africa-descended people, let alone Black Latin Americans engaged in literary production. In countries such as Costa Rica, Uruguay, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, Ecuador and Peru, to name a few, early scholars of the 1970s excavated bodies of literature that had been entombed and interred in the literary abyss. Resurrected and brought to the literary center were works by overlooked writers such as Candelario Obeso of Columbia, Juan Francisco Manzano of Cuba, and Juan Pablo Sojo of Venezuela, to name a few. These works revealed a literary aesthetic and tradition that had its genesis in the oral tradition of slavery in Latin America, progressing to thematic presentations of civil and social protest. For the US academy, the early scholars of Afro-Hispanic literatures laid the foundation for scholarship that was to follow due to their published work, curricular development and training of future

generations of researcher/educators on the literary works of talented Black writers in Latin America. Furthermore, the scholarship rendered, centered the socio-political, economic, and cultural circumstances of Black communities in Latin America, privileging the readership with a mimetic, yet verisimilar glance into the lived experiences of other Blacks in the African Diaspora, outside of a North American context.

With regard to literary production by Blacks in Latin America, Richard Jackson notes that the early period of Afro-Hispanic literature “covers oral literature and what can be called the first hundred years of Afro-Latin American writings in Spanish” (JACKSON, 1979, p. xi), a period that Jackson dates from 1821-1921. Jackson begins this early period with the publication year of Cuban Juan Francisco Manzano’s *Poesía Lírica (Cantos a Lesbía)*, regarded as the first book of poetry published by a writer of African ancestry in Spanish America.

As a side note, it is worth mentioning that later in the 19th century, the first book/anthology to deal exclusively with black writers in Latin America was Francisco Calcagno’s *Poetas de color*, published in 1867. In this seminal work recognizing the importance of slave testimonies, Calcagno discusses slave and free black poets, among them black Peruvian Gabriel de la Concepción Valdéz, known as “Plácido,” and Juan Francisco Manzano, the latter of whose works include his second book of poetry *Flores pasajeras* published in 1830 and his *Autobiografía* published in English in 1840.

Other important writers of this early period dating from 1821 to 1921 include José Manuel Valdés, the first black writer to publish in Peru in the 1830s, Colombia’s Candelario Obeso who published *Cantos populares de mi tierra* in 1877, and Gaspar Octavio Hernández, the black Panamanian modernist poet. Jackson deems 1921 as an appropriate end date for the first period as he believes that the appearance of Nicolas Guillen in Cuba in 1922, and Guillén’s *Motivos de son* (1930), charted a new course relative to the literature produced by writers of African heritage in Latin America. Thus, Jackson’s second period dates from 1922-1949, and reflects what he considers the major period:

I consider the publication of that volume to be the real starting date for what became a major period of authentic black literary expression in Spanish America, a period that coincides with the high period of negristic written largely by white writers in Spanish America, with the negritude movement in the French Caribbean, and with the development of black literary consciousness in Brazil (JACKSON, 1979, p. xii).

Jackson states that he begins in 1922 as it represents the year of the first published work by Cuba’s Nicolas Guillen. Again, noteworthy is that fact that today, Nicolás Guillén has reached canonical status in Latin American literature and is among the privileged literary figures to grace the bound pages of “officially sanctioned” Latin American critical anthologies and literary history. Guillén’s published works are among those chronicled, as he is the first Cuban writer of African ancestry to receive the Cuban National Prize for Literature, bestowed in 1983. The second so honored in Cuba was Nancy Morejón in 2001. In addition, Jackson writes into literary history the parallel development of pan-Black literary expressions that were occurring simultaneously in Spanish, French, and Portuguese in the Americas. According to Jackson, and to reiterate, this period is crucial because it renders a parallel developmental reading of poetic *negritud* (black-themed poetry written largely by white writers in Spanish America), the negritude movement in principally the French Caribbean, and the awareness of black literary consciousness in Brazil. Interjecting an Anglophone, US context,

Miriam De Costa in *Blacks in Hispanic Literature* offers, “Afro-Hispanic literature flowered in the Thirties, when the turn-of-the-century cult of the Negro erupted full bloom into *negrismo*, *Négritude* and the Harlem Renaissance” (DE COSTA, 1977, p. 3). De Costa’s inclusion of the Harlem Renaissance makes for a complete linguistic and geographical representation of Black literary inertia of the time in the Americas. In addition, the cross-cultural/boundary interactions of Césaire, Guillén, Hughes, Abdías de Nascimento (Brazil), among other literary figures of the time, only serve to consolidate the shared histories, plights, and conditions of the “Negro” in the Americas. However in the Spanish American context, Jackson brands Guillén as being pivotal to this period citing his literary production including *Motivos de Son*, *Songoro cosongo*, published in 1931, *West Indies Limited*, 1934, and the central role these works played in the development of black consciousness and black literature in Latin America in the 1930s into the 1940s.

During this period, Blacks as authors in Spanish America were given high visibility, relatively speaking, due to the appearance of works onto the national and international literary scenes. Published work by black writers during this period included Juan Pablo Sojo’s *Nochebuena negra* (1943) in Venezuela, Adalberto Ortiz’s *Juyungo* (1943) in Ecuador, Pilar Barrios’ *Piel negra* and Virginia Brindis de Salas’ *Pregón de Marimorena* (1947) in Uruguay, and Arnaldo Palacios’ *Las estrellas son negras* (1949) in Colombia. Collectively, these works provided for the readership a view into a once “dark” space in Latin American consciousness. Works such as Barrios’ *Piel negra* and Palacios’ *Las estrellas son negras* deal with issues of black rage and rise from social and political exclusion. Additionally, these novels and poems began to literarily deconstruct centuries of what scholar Cornel West describes as “psychic violence” perpetrated against Africa-descended people, through the presentation of counter narratives that suggested black pride, solidarity in the struggle and a renewed consciousness of self. The thematic foci of the texts published in Spanish America during this period, set the stage for the onslaught of writers and writing that were to come. In their works, leit-motifs and themes focused on identity, discrimination, oppression, displacement, disfranchisement, poverty, exploitation and social liberation. Their works presented for the readership the necessary continuum that linked the colonial past and slavery to the post-colonial realities of modern oppression and alienation of Blacks in Latin America.

In the final section of *Black Writers in Latin America*, Richard Jackson presents what he referred to in 1979 as the contemporary period of Afro-Latin American literature spanning from 1950s to the close of the decade described as the “boom” in Afro-Hispanic letters, the 1970s. Again, his primary focus is centering the literary works of authors who in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, continued to position their writing as counter-discourse to issues confronting Afro-Latin America in order to demonstrate Black visibility, resistance, protest and liberation through literature. Numerous works published in these three decades reveal social marginalization, discrimination, disenfranchisement, and poverty faced by black communities. Additionally, Jackson states that the literature references the increased awareness of the United States, of international black consciousness, and the polemics of race and class in Third World spaces.

I must mention that among these “contemporary writers,” Jackson includes the Afro-Colombian writer, Manuel Zapata Olivella, referred to as the “dean of Afro-Hispanic letters” as a result of his contributions to the field. However, I would place Zapata Olivella in the prior group as presented by Jackson due to the fact that Zapata Olivella began his writing career in the 1940s and published his first novel *Tierra Mojada*, in 1947. However, as a writer, Zapata Olivella flourished during the decades of the 50s, 60s and 70s. His published works dealt unapologetically with the African Diaspora

and the plight of the marginalized downtrodden. These works of fiction include *Pasión vagabunda* (1949), *He visto la noche* (1953), *Chambacú, corral de negros* (1967), to name a few. Other writers of the contemporary period include Nelson Estupiñán Bass, who published *Cuando los guayacanes florecían* in 1954, *El paraíso* in 1958, and *El último río*, in 1966. These texts, situated in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, deal with black uprisings, oppression, corrupt government and racial/ethnic passing in the heavily miscegenated province.

In Peru, it was the *decimista* Nicomedes Santa Cruz who came onto the literary scene in the 1960s. In 1969, Norberto James' poem "Los inmigrantes" won a prestigious literary prize in the Dominican Republic. In Panama, Carlos Guillermo Wilson, literarily known as Cubena, published *Cuentos del negro Cubena* and *Pensamientos del negro Cubena* in 1977. And, as the 60s and 70s came to a close, many emerging writers who would dominate Afro-Hispanic literature of the 80s and beyond were publishing their first literary work. They include Cuba's Nancy Morejón, Costa Rica's Quince Duncan, and the Dominican Republic's Blas Jiménez.

In addition to the emergence of writers, literary criticism in the form of doctoral dissertations, articles and books flourished during this period. Scholars such as Marvin Lewis, Donald Gordon, Miriam De Costa Willis, Edward Mullen, Ian Smart, James Davis, Annette Dunzo, Dellita Martin-Ogunsola, produced critical works on black writers in Latin America. Literary journals such as the *College Language Association Journal*, *Callaloo*, the *Afro-Hispanic Review* and others provided publishing opportunities for this innovative scholarship. University presses such as the University of New Mexico, the University of Texas, the University of Colorado, Howard University and the University of Missouri published monographs by many of the aforementioned scholars.

Since the 1980s and progressing into the twentieth century, Afro-Hispanic letters has continued and is continuing to reach new heights as countless academic departments of foreign/modern languages have institutionalized courses that deal specifically with the Afro-Latin experience and tradition. Numerous masters and doctoral theses continue to center the works of writers of African ancestry in Latin America. Symposia, colloquia, conferences, throughout the Americas and abroad continue to promote scholarly engagement on Afro-Latin American culture and civilization. And, this momentum is not limited to the United States. National space in many Latin American countries is being given to issues surrounding race and inequality. In addition, national and international news headlines have brought visibility to the plight of Blacks in Latin America from Colombia and Mexico, to Venezuela, Costa Rica, Panama, and Brazil. Works by the aforementioned Black Latin American authors are beginning to appear in literary histories and anthologies, both at home and abroad. Black Studies departments and programs are broadening their scope to encompass blackness in the "other" Americas, encompassing the African Diaspora in the Western hemisphere. Translations of works by writers such as Manuel Zapata Olivella, Quince Duncan, Blas Jimenez, Lucia Charún-Illescas (Peru) and others are available to English-speaking audiences, thus expanding the readership. Writers such as Donato N'Dongo and Juan Tomás Ávila of the former Spanish colony in Africa, Equatorial Guinea, are emerging onto the US literary scene. Additionally, a new generation of young US-based scholars including Abriel Abudu, Lesley Feracho, Dina De Luca, Debbie Lee-DiStefano, Christopher Dennis, Dawn Duke, Linda Howe, M'bare N'gom, Martha Orjeda, Jerome Branche, Dorothy Moby, Dawn Stinchcomb, Emmanuel Harris, Aida Heredia, Emanuelle Olivella, Cristina Cabral, Marco Polo Hernandez Cuevas, Mario Chandler, Ana Beatriz Gonçalves, Elisa Rizo, among others, have emerged. And, their published articles and monographs are making substantial contributing to the existing literature. Their writings offer critical interpretations on published works by writers that comprise the Afro-Latin American literary trajectory, especially the works of new and

emerging writers like Shirley Campbell of Costa Rica, Cristina Cabral of Uruguay, Edelma Zapata Pérez of Colombia, Tomás Ávila and Donato N'Dongo of Ecuatorial Guinea, Myra Santos-Febres of Puerto Rico, Junot Diaz of the Dominican Republic, Yvonne-América Truque Vélez of Colombia, and Soleida Ríos de Cuba.

In looking head towards the future of Afro-Hispanic letters, the outlook is extremely positive as scholarship on this corpus of literature is gaining more space in the most prestigious literary and cultural studies journal and academic. University presses from UCLA to Duke, Harvard, Oxford, the University of Texas and the University of Michigan are publishing monographs on aforementioned writers by many new scholars in the field. Additionally, collaborative efforts on Afro-Latin America between universities such as the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and Duke are forming. Leading national universities in Latin America and Africa are sponsoring international conferences and symposia celebrating the contributions of Black writers such as the 2005 colloquia on the work of Nicomedes Santa Cruz, sponsored by the National University of Peru, in San Marcos, and the First International Conference on Afro-Hispanic Letters Across the Disciplines, summer of 2007 in Accra, Ghana, West Africa. In the US, Black writers from Latin America are visiting annually leading universities as visiting international scholars and lecturers. Quince Duncan, for example, has held visiting positions at Indiana University of Pennsylvania and most recently in 2004, at Purdue University; Donato N'Dongo has been in residence at the University of Missouri, Columbia, since 2006; and, Manuel Zapata Olivella, Luz Argentina Chiriboga (Ecuador), Nancy Morejón and Blas Jiménez have held similar visiting international positions.

In addition, due to the success for the *Afro-Hispanic Review* (currently housed Vanderbilt University), the *College Language Association Journal* at Morehouse College, and *Callaloo* currently published out of Texas A&M, new literary journal came onto the scene during the late 1980s, early 1990s. An example of such is *PALARA, the Publication of the Afro-Latin American Research Association*, founded at the University of Missouri-Columbia, currently housed at Purdue University – West Lafayette campus. As the current managing editor of *PALARA*, I am privileged to have first hand knowledge of the new critical scholarship and the appearance of new writers in the area of Afro-Latin American studies. With this knowledge, I am optimistic about the future of, and confident in the growth and survival of, Afro-Hispanic studies, in academia in the US and abroad.

In conclusion, the field of Afro-Latin American literature and civilization is one that is expanding and challenging constantly the prescribed worldview with regard to the plight of peoples representing the Spanish-speaking African Diaspora. Such scholarship makes assessable and visible literary and social voices of Blacks in Latin America as they tell their stories of historical survival, continued struggle and civil success. Additionally, the literary production of Latin American writers of African descent presents a formidable truth regarding the historical presence and participation of Blacks who have made significant cultural contributions toward the configuration and reconfiguration of national culture and history in countries with a questionable black population to those where citizens of African ancestry comprise the majority. Furthermore, scholarship in the field reaffirms the contributions of black writers, scholars and researchers in countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia and Brazil. These gifted and talented Afro-Latin Americans provide for literary and cultural studies scholars a ripe corpus of writings on which to base scholarly and critical observations. And, as these writers continue to emerge and produce, so will the scholarship, as they jointly enrich and sustain Afro-Latin American letters and civilization well into the 21st century and beyond.

ABSTRACT

This article purposes to present a chronological view of Afro-Hispanic literature in US academic circles. It proposes to discuss the early history of its development, its present status and its future as an academic discipline in the US. The seminal text of Richard Jackson, *Black Writers in Latin America* (1979), sets the paradigmatic structure of the essay.

Keywords: Afro-Hispanic Literature. Nicolás Guillén. Richard Jackson.

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