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Racial Experiments in Cuban Literature and Ethnography

Thomas F. Anderson, University of Notre Dame

Emily A. Maguire, *Racial Experiments in Cuban Literature and Ethnography*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 237 pp.

Afrocubanismo is again in vogue. While issues of race and national identity have long been of interest to scholars of Caribbean studies, the past decade has witnessed a renewed exploration of the significance of this Cuban artistic movement of the 1920s and 1930s. In addition to numerous articles and book chapters, monographs such as Luis Duno Gottberg's *Solventando las diferencias: La ideología del mestizaje en Cuba* (Iberoamericana, 2003) and Miguel Arnedo Gómez's *Writing Rumba: The Afro-Cubanista Movement in Poetry* (University of Virginia Press, 2006) engage in an in-depth exploration of the construction of race in *Afrocubanista* poetry; Mamadou Badiane's *The Changing Face of Afro-Caribbean Cultural Identity: Negrismo and Négritude* (Lexington, 2010), taking a comparative approach, locates *Afrocubanismo* within a broader international narrative of literary explorations of black subjectivity. Alejandra Bronfman's *Measures of Equality: Social Science, Citizenship, and Race in Cuba, 1920-1940* (2004) approaches the movement from a historiographical perspective, tracing the dialogues and debates around race on the island that were the backdrop for *Afrocubanista* verse.

Carnival and National Identity in the Poetry of Afro-Cubanismo, Thomas F. Anderson's nuanced and meticulously researched study adds to this body of scholarship as it sheds new light on a previously unexplored group of texts: poems dealing with Cuban carnival celebrations. While carnival on other Caribbean islands has been a popular subject of research, Cuban carnival and in particular with *comparsas*, Afro-Cuban musical parades with roots in African religious ritual – has received much less scholarly attention. Viewed by white society – and often by middle class black Cubans – as representative of the more “primitive” aspects of Afro-Cuban culture, *comparsas* were highly controversial in Cuba in the first half of the twentieth century, so much so that public *comparsa* performances were illegal for most of the 1920s and 1930s. Ironically, these years also constitute the heyday of *Afrocubanismo*, a time when literary and visual representations of African and Afro-Cuban culture (much of it by white writers) circulated widely in Cuban magazines and newspapers. By looking at poems about *comparsas* published

between 1916 and 1950, Anderson's book shows "how this controversy [over *comparsas*] played out in Cuban poetry written during the same period" (18). His study of this poetic corpus also goes beyond that modest intention, as it illuminates the ways in which race and national identity were being negotiated – both on the page and in the street – during Cuba's first decades as a nation. Because of their public, performative nature, *comparsas* functioned as a kind of lightning rod around which different perspectives on race and culture in Cuba were aired. Even as these poems about *comparsas* chronicle the arrival and development of *Afrocubanismo* as an artistic movement, they also reveal the reservations and inconsistencies in writers' attitudes towards Afro-Cuban culture.

Anderson begins his study with an introductory chapter that outlines the social and political climate that contributed to the banning of *comparsas*. Afro-Cuban carnival processions first gained popularity in the nineteenth century, as part of the festivities surrounding the *Día de Reyes* (Epiphany). While these early musical celebrations were also closely regulated, *comparsas* became particularly controversial in Cuba's first decades after Independence, when debates around the political participation of black Cubans brought issues of race (and racialized culture) to the fore. Tension around racial issues began to escalate after 1908, when Evaristo Estenoz founded the *Partido Independiente de Color* (Independent Party of Color), and reached a head during what Anderson, following historian Aline Helg, calls the "Racist Massacre of 1912" (7). Often referred to as the War of 1912 (*la Guerra del '12*), the conflict began when protests black by Cubans over the banning of political organizing along racial lines were met by "fierce repression by the Cuban army" (6). By the time the nationwide violence had ended, an estimated three to six thousand black and mulatto Cubans had been killed. The conflict fueled white elites' fears of a "black revolt" and a distrust of anything they saw as connected to Afro-Cuban *brujería*, or witchcraft (8-9). These fears were partly responsible for Havana mayor Freyre de Andrade's banning of *comparsas* in 1913, a ban that would remain largely in place until 1937.

After the careful contextualization of *comparsas* provided by the book's first chapter, each of Anderson's subsequent chapters explores the depiction of carnival in the work of one author, often centering on a close reading of one poem by that writer. Beginning with Felipe Pichardo Moya's poem "La comparsa" (1916), Anderson examines texts by Alejo Carpentier, Nicolás Guillén, Emilio Ballagas, José Zacarías Tallet, Felix Caignet, and Marcelino Arozarena, and ends with an exploration of Spanish-born writer Alfonso Camín's writing on the black and

white carnival celebrations of the 1940s and 50s. This structure allows Anderson to present *Afrocubanismo* in all its breadth and diversity, just as his intimate knowledge of the sociopolitical context helps shape his new and often revelatory readings of this corpus. His sustained analysis of each author highlights the importance of understudied writers like Pichardo Moya and Camín, provides fresh new readings of paradigmatic texts by writers like Guillén, and sheds light on the lesser-known poetry of writers such as Carpentier who are better known for their work in other genres.

Felipe Pichardo Moya's "La comparsa" (1916), the first – and earliest – poem Anderson analyzes, was published only four years after the War of 1912, when racial tensions in Cuba were still running high. Its publication coincided with a brief period when *comparsas* were legalized in Havana, only to be banned again following a violent incident and the subsequent journalistic outcry. Anderson shows how Pichardo Moya drew on early criminological and ethnographic writing of the period such as Fernando Ortiz's *Los negros brujos* (1906) and Israel Castellanos's "El tipo brujo" (1914), as well as the journalistic debates over *comparsas*, texts which viewed Afro-Cuban religious practices as "primitive." While previous critics have seen Pichardo Moya's descriptions as a relatively objective depiction of a carnival procession through a working class Afro-Cuban neighborhood, Anderson argues that "La comparsa" echoes white fears of Afro-Cuban religion and "reveals [Pichardo Moya's] own negative opinion...of such spectacles" (32). The text focuses on "mysterious and seamy" (45) aspects of the *comparsa*, portraying carnival celebrations as dark and sinister rather than joyous and playful. As the poem is considered a precursor to the major works of *Afrocubanismo*, an understanding of the political and ideological undercurrents that frame Pichardo Moya's work reveals the conservative ideological underpinnings of early *Afrocubanista* writing, a conservatism that, as Anderson later shows, did not disappear with Pichardo Moya but can also be seen in writers such as Emilio Ballagas.

Alejo Carpentier, the subject of Anderson's third chapter, is best known as the author of novels such as *The Kingdom of this World* and *The Lost Steps*. Yet he also published some of the earliest examples of *Afrocubanista* verse, a few of which were later set to music by Cuban composer Alejandro García Caturla. Anderson focuses his analysis on Carpentier's poem "Juego santo," one of the first poems to focus on Afro-Cuban religious rituals, in this case a *ñáñigo* (Abakuá) initiation ceremony. While Carpentier had many opportunities to observe certain kinds

of Abakuá celebrations, Anderson argues that “Carpentier did not always understand what he was witnessing” (58). Through a close analysis of the religious and secular elements mentioned in the poem – from sacred instruments to *farolas* (carnival lanterns) – Anderson shows that Carpentier’s text in fact depicts several different elements of Abakuá ritual that are separate from the initiation itself: the unofficial dancing that took place in front of Abakuá lodges and the description of a *comparsa ñáñiga*, an Abakuá carnival procession that was not directly related to more formal lodge ceremonies. Despite these errors, Anderson finds the poem’s early depiction of Abakuá ritual significant, given that much government propaganda and social science discourse of the time portrayed the sect as criminal and violent. Read in this context, Carpentier’s portrayal of Afro-Cuban ritual can thus also be seen as a radical, anti-bourgeois gesture.

Anderson’s most significant contribution to our understanding of the relationship between racial politics and *Afrocubanismo* may be his reading of Nicolás Guillén’s poem “Sensemayá,” the subject of his third chapter. As Anderson points out, “Sensemayá” is perhaps Guillén’s most well known and frequently anthologized poem; it has also been subjected to a dizzyingly diverse array of interpretations, many of which fail to understand the poem’s repeated “chorus” of “Mayombé – bombe – mayombé!” as anything beyond sound play or onomatopoeia. Anderson, reading the poem in the context of the debates over Afro-cuban carnival processions, argues that Guillén’s text in fact offers a response to the banning of *comparsas*; while it can be read as the recreation of a traditional chant for killing snakes, the poem “is also a metaphor for the government’s efforts to eliminate carnival processions and other Afro-Cuban cultural manifestations in Cuba” (80). Tracing the close relationship between the poem’s Afro-Cuban words and key elements of Abakuá and Palo Monte practice, Anderson shows how “mayombé-bombé-mayombé,” through the way in which it is spoken, may refer to both the *mayombero*, a Palo Monte priest, and to the *majá*, the sacred snake of both Palo Monte and Abakuá cosmology. Anderson asserts that the poem’s description of the snake as twisting around a stick directly references *anaforuana*, or Abakuá chalk drawings, that show the sacred snake wrapped around a tree. When read within these cultural contexts, the killing of the snake in the poem is not merely “the execution of an evil creature” but can instead be seen as “acting out a symbolic regeneration of ...divine power” (105). By understanding the killing of the snake as a gesture of “social and

political resistance” (107), this innovative interpretation of the poem highlights the politicized nature of Guillén’s early poetry.

Anderson’s readings of carnival poems by Guillén and Carpentier bring to light previously unexplored aspects of the work of these writers. Later chapters in the book, through the reading of lesser-known (at least to non-specialists) writers such as José Zacarías Tallet, Felix Caignet, and Alfonso Camín, emphasize unexplored aspects of Cuban carnival itself. In the chapter dedicated to an analysis of Tallet’s “Quintín Barahona,” Anderson shows how Afro-Cuban *comparsas* known as *chambelonas* (after a popular political song) were used by politicians -- both black and white -- to court the black vote during election campaigns. The black *comparsa* musician who protagonizes Tallet’s poem exemplifies the conflicting position in which many *chambelona* participants may have found themselves; while uninterested in politics (and aware that politicians are not really interested in him), he nonetheless participates in the spectacle because he needs the money he is being paid to do so. Tallet’s portrait of Quintín allows him to “allude to the deeply corrupt nature of the electoral process in Cuba,” a situation in which the white exploitation of black musicians is met with apathy from black voters.

Writers such as Pichardo Moya, Carpentier, and even Guillén tended to portray carnival processions as largely Afro-Cuban performances; yet carnival was in fact celebrated by both black and white Cubans, although not always together. As Anderson notes at numerous points throughout his study, white Cubans developed their own carnival processions, which were often kept separate from Afro-Cuban *comparsas*. Geared towards the developing tourist industry on the island, white carnival processions were sometimes politically supported even when Afro-Cuban performances were being suppressed. Spanish poet Alfonso Camín’s “Carnival en la Habana” (1952) the focus of Anderson’s last chapter, offers a “panoramic view” of Havana carnival traditions during the first decades of the twentieth century (218). Camín, though Spanish, spent significant time in Cuba, and was one of the precursors to *Afrocubanismo*, a contribution that sometimes went unrecognized. While the first half of Camín’s poem traces the origins of Afro-Cuban carnival, and offers (sometimes inaccurate) portraits of individual *comparsas*, the second part of the text portrays the high-society *comparsas*, emphasizing “the materialism and consumerism that eventually came to dominate Havana’s white carnival” (241). In reflecting on these contrasts, Camín’s poem both reflects on the way in which Cuban carnival had changed and offers a commentary on *Afrocubanismo*’s relationship to carnival itself.

Anderson's close readings of poetic texts are enhanced by the many visual examples of *Afroubanista* culture included throughout the book, from manuscript copies of poems to illustrations, carnival programs, and photographs of both black and white carnival processions. Anderson also includes an appendix with the complete texts of the poems he analyzes, a helpful addition for readers who may be less than familiar with some of this material. The only thing missing, both in the appendix and throughout the text itself, is an English translation of the poems; while all other quotations in Spanish in the text are translated, the poetry is not. Although the translation of this poetic corpus certainly presents particular challenges (given its use of Afro-Cuban linguistic and cultural references), the lack of some kind of rendering of the poems in English makes the study less accessible to readers not fluent in Spanish.

Anderson has done an impressive job of researching the artistic and socio-political characteristics of this moment, and his careful reading of his poetic corpus makes good use of this material. Of particular note is his use of *Adelante*, a short-lived Afro-Cuban journal that has received little previous critical attention, despite its key role in the debates around race and Afro-Cuban culture in the 1920s and 1930s. A look at the articles and essays in *Adelante* gives a clearer picture of the ways in which black and mulatto Cubans were themselves weighing in on the debates around race and racialized cultural practices (such as *comparsas*). The overall result is a book that is focused but not narrow; this is an important study, with broad implications for literary critics as well as for Caribbean scholars in a variety of disciplines. As Anderson shows how these poetic portrayals of Cuban *comparsas* are connected to issues of class, politics, religion, culture, and public space, he reveals *Afroubanismo* to be a richer, more complex movement than it has been previously understood to be.