
RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

RESEARCH ON BLACK THEMES IN SPANISH AMERICAN LITERATURE: A Bibliographic Guide to Recent Trends

Richard L. Jackson
Carleton University, Canada

Frederick P. Bowser has observed that: "Literature is perhaps as precise a way as any other to determine the attitudes held by racial groups toward each other, but for Spanish America very little systematic investigation has been done in this regard."¹ This field of investigation now is somewhat better off than the handful of items he mentioned would suggest. Most of this research has been carried out in the last ten years as an increasing number of scholars are realizing that blacks have participated integrally throughout the literary history of Spanish America, both as characters and as authors, and that unlimited possibilities exist for research on black themes in Spanish American literature in general and on Afro-Spanish American literary expression in particular.

I shared Bowser's view in the sixties² when I anticipated that more research on black themes in Spanish American literature would correspond to what was a steadily increasing interest in race relations and race mixture in Latin America. And in the seventies I agreed more specifically with Magnus Mörner³ who, in 1970, had called for more studies on racist writers in Latin America.

RACIST AUTHORS AND THE HERITAGE OF WHITE RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Mörner had written that although one or another of the Latin American racist writers "has attracted the critical attention of modern students

(Martin Stabb, for example), a comprehensive study of this interesting aspect of Latin American 'Geistesgeschichte' remains to be written." The history of racism⁴ and racist writers in Spanish America has not yet been fully explored, but some works have begun to appear. Martin Stabb's *In Quest of Identity*, as Mörner intimates, is an excellent starting point. Roger Bastide,⁵ Gregory Rabassa,⁶ Richard A. Prêto-Rodas,⁷ and David T. Haberly,⁸ among others, have shown that racial stereotypes and expressions of prejudice and racial insult are common themes in the literature of Brazil.

In a recent study, *The Black Image in Latin American Literature*, and a previous article, "Black Phobia and the White Aesthetic in Spanish America,"⁹ I concentrated on some of the literary manifestations of the heritage of white racial consciousness in the Spanish-speaking area of Latin America, primarily of this century, in an attempt to determine the impact it has had on some authors who propagate (at times unintentionally) racist attitudes and negative images of blacks, especially in the literature of the Spanish American mainland in which research on black themes, scarce until now, has begun to gain momentum.¹⁰ These studies singled out racism and the white aesthetic, two of the most fundamental though largely disregarded aspects of black themes in Latin American literature, in an attempt to contribute to the ongoing debate regarding the nature of race relations and the kind of prejudice prevalent in Latin America.

Two other recent publications deserve special attention: *The Devil, the Gargoyle and the Buffoon: The Negro as Metaphor in Western Literature*, by Lemuel Johnson; and *Narciso descubre su trasero (El negro en la cultura puertorriqueña)*, by Isabelo Zenón Cruz. Johnson questions the credibility of much of the literature in the Western world by examining the "malignant and benign literary caricatures" through which English, French, and Hispanic writers attempted to accommodate to the idea of blackness in human form. Johnson's comparative study carried his examination through to the negrophilisms of the twenties and thirties. *The Black Image* and "Black Phobia" used these decades largely as a point of departure. My studies benefited from Johnson's work and attempted to enlarge upon his pioneering discussions.

The massive work in two volumes by Zenón Cruz is a comprehensive analysis (exposé) of racism and racist authors in Puerto Rico with conclusions that can be applied to other countries in Latin America. This detailed study questions the credibility of much "black" literature by white authors in Puerto Rico and, while promising to become the standard reference on black themes in the literature of that country,

serves at the same time as a model for similar studies in the future on a by-country basis.

THE BLACK AS SOCIAL SYMBOL

Although recent research has shown that racism and the white aesthetic are manifested in the preconceptions, misconceptions, and stereotypes propagated either wittingly or unintentionally by many white Spanish American authors, other findings indicate that not all of the “white” literature on black themes and characters in Spanish America takes an overtly negative approach to black people. It is clear that in many twentieth-century novels, for example, committed writers throughout the Caribbean and the Spanish American mainland reject the nineteenth-century mentality on race and attack racism and the white aesthetic, which they see as accomplices in the social, racial, and economic oppression of black people. In these *socionegristic* novels, which are designed to carry to the reader a message of racial equality and social justice, expressions of prejudice come from characters.

Recent studies—my *The Black Image in Latin American Literature* and Clementine C. Rabassa’s “Prolegómeno al tema del negro en la obra de Demetrio Aguilera Malta” for example, have shown that many white writers react against the heritage of white racial consciousness in Spanish America and become literary defenders interested in the redemption of black people as members of the proletariat of this century. In this *engagé* literature, some novelists unavoidably use the black as a literary social symbol of protest against a modern social phenomenon.¹¹ Others, like Alejo Carpentier¹² in Cuba, though partly for this same purpose, take a retrospective look at black slavery. Social protest themes in the Spanish Caribbean are found not only in Cuba but in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico as well.¹³

Literary defenders of blacks in Mexico date back, perhaps, to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who showed some sympathy for the black condition in her works, and to José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, whose *El Periquillo Sarniento* (1816) has been called the first antislavery novel in America, certainly the first to denounce slavery and to reject *racist arguments that hold blacks to be inferior*.¹⁴ Committed writers in Central America—in Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and particularly in Costa Rica and Panama—like Miguel Angel Asturias in Guatemala, have written responsible literature often in defense of the black worker beset by hardships and difficulties at times brought on by racial oppression.¹⁵ The black presence, though ambivalently approached, is a thematic constant even in the works of the Nicaraguan

Rubén Darío, perhaps Latin America's foremost literary figure. Although Darío often shared the contempt toward black people common in Spanish America and even though some of his poems are reminiscent of racist images found in the "false black poetry" cultivated by white intellectuals in the thirties and forties, much of his social poetry, paradoxically, is a protest against the hardships suffered by black people.¹⁶

The port of Cartagena, on the Caribbean coast, was one of the largest slave markets in America, and slavery, like black life and customs, was a popular literary theme in much of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Colombian literature.¹⁷ Black themes and characters are also abundantly represented in Venezuelan literature. *Mene* (1936), by Díaz Sánchez, develops perhaps the strongest social protest theme along the lines followed in much of the literature in Spanish America.

In Ecuador, Demetrio Aguilera Malta published, with Joaquín Gallegos Lara and Enrique Gil Gilbert, a collection of short stories entitled *Los que se van* (1930). These three authors, together with José de la Cuadra and Alfredo Pareja Díez-Canseco, major novelists in the Guayaquil region, were in fact known as the Group of Guayaquil.¹⁸ All of these dedicated writers were committed to the creation of a literature of protest designed to expose the social evils suffered by the down-trodden, largely dark-skinned of Ecuador.

Although closer reading of these and other socionegristic novels might bear out "that racism derives from a sense of group supremacy and is not nullified by simply pleading justice for the oppressed,"¹⁹ future research on black themes in Spanish American literature must take into account this link between nonblack literary defenders of the black and Afro-Spanish American writers who often take the same social revolutionary stance.

THE AFRO-SPANISH AMERICAN AUTHOR

The study of Afro-Hispanic literature is experiencing its own kind of boom in the seventies, and recent activities—such as the Panel on the Black Writer in Latin America (Sixth National Convention of the Popular Culture Association in Chicago, 22–24 April 1976); the Medgar Evers College, CUNY, Symposium on Afro-Hispanic Literature (Center for Inter-American Relations in New York, 18 June 1976); the planning for an American Society for Afro-Hispanic Literature; a journal (*Studies in Afro-Hispanic Literature*); and the Primer Congreso de la Cultura Negra de las Américas (to take place in Bogotá July 1977)—confirm that interest is higher now than it was in the fifties and sixties, higher even than it was in the celebrated high period of *poesía negra* during the

thirties and forties. The big difference now is that more black scholars than ever before are focusing attention on the black experience in Spanish America. Further, I believe there is more interest in authentic black literature; that is, in literature by blacks in Spanish America rather than in Spanish American literature simply on black themes.

This new generation of black scholars has begun to explore the developing concept of Negritude²⁰ in Latin America and to raise related questions²¹ as they seek to determine the level of black consciousness in countries where black communities exist (persist) despite widespread *mestizaje* (miscegenation). These scholars want to discover whether blacks in such countries as Brazil, Costa Rica, Cuba, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela see themselves as part of a unified black world where black liberation, black identity, and equality of rights and opportunity have high priority, or whether these concerns have been erased or overruled by socialist revolutionary consciousness, *mestizaje*, and cultural assimilation; whether, in effect, there is a pull toward a "black aesthetic" or toward the Third World.

Of primary interest is the recent work done by Martha K. Cobb and Antonio Olliz Boyd²² who have tried to apply to Afro-Latin American literature a critical framework built in part on the thematic model of the basic tenets of Negritude and in part on the more recently defined literary characteristics of the black aesthetic, the cultural arm of black nationalism in the United States. Establishing concepts of literary blackness requires contrast with the "black" literature of white authors as differences become apparent. This recent trend is significant for there has been little research done to date in which distinctions have been made along ethnic lines in literary criticism on black themes in Hispanic literature.

Having this critical framework available is becoming increasingly more indispensable, for there are many Afro-Spanish American writers destined to acquire the same international recognition enjoyed by Nicolás Guillén. Now in his seventies, this "great black poet of Cuba" has become the object of a phenomenal outpouring of bibliographies, critical studies, translations, and new editions,²³ some commemorating his seventieth birthday, with others underway.²⁴ Although more works by writers of African descent in Spanish America are available now than ever before, there is much room for improvement in the area of new editions, translations, and specialized anthologies.

Edward Farrison recently wrote that "it is the function of the historian and critic of literature, be it remembered, first to find out what has been written and only second to evaluate it."²⁵ Finding out what has

been written by blacks in Spanish America and making it available is more urgent even than evaluation and critical formats, for, perhaps to a greater degree than in the United States, Afro-Hispanic authors are underrepresented in the standard Spanish American anthologies and literary histories, or in such local publications dealing exclusively with regional authors. Even the studies and volumes dealing exclusively with the so-called "black poetry" in Spanish America generally do not give adequate representation to the black writer.

Whatever the reasons for the exclusion of black writers in Spanish America from general, local, and specialized anthologies and literary histories, I would not like to accept that these reasons are artistic and aesthetic in nature; that black writers are excluded because they are "bad," since no doubt there are worse authors included who are white. Even if, in the final analysis, literary aesthetics and "intrinsic merit" are to assume priority, "mainstream" anthologies and literary histories, in deference to historical perspective, should have in the first instance a neglected body of socioethnic literature such as this one represented. It would seem reasonable to do for black poets in Spanish what Emile Snyder has done for black poets in French, namely, to "gamble first on what appears most human in literature, asking only later for the substantiation of literary aesthetics."²⁶

This gamble might best be taken and this underrepresentation more quickly overcome through the publication of anthologies in English and in Spanish of "black" literature that, for a change, is authentically and fully black, with contributions restricted to authors of African descent in Spanish America who are recognizably black or who identify themselves as black. These anthologies should be up to date and should include unpublished work, hard-to-get items by lesser known authors originally published in small quantity or in journals with limited circulation, as well as literature by better known writers.

Such "authentic" black anthologies and the new critical criteria alluded to earlier, which are being established by black scholars today, will help us look back on Spanish American literature with a clearer understanding of the significant role blacks have played in the development of that literature. They will also enhance our understanding of the relationship between ethnicity and literary aesthetics, an area of study that is becoming increasingly more important.

NOTES

Editors' Note: Full citations will be given in the notes for those works that do not appear in the bibliography that follows. Works that are listed in the bibliography or that appear in a

previous note will be given in a shortened reference, i.e., last name of author and short title.

1. "The African in Colonial Spanish America: Reflections on Research Achievements and Priorities," *LARR* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1972):77–94.
2. Jackson, "An Underdeveloped Area."
3. "Historical Research on Race Relations in Latin America during the National Period," in *Race and Class in Latin America*, ed. by M. Mörner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 225.
4. Luis Alberto Sánchez called attention to "El racismo hispano" in *El pueblo en la revolución americana* (1942), recently reprinted in Lima by P. L. Villanueva, 1971. Martín Sagrera has two recent books on racism in Spanish America: *Racismo y política en Puerto Rico* (Río Piedras: Editorial Edil Inc., 1973) and the more comprehensive *Los racismos en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones La Bastilla, 1974). And of course we have H. Hoetink's *Slavery and Race Relations* (New York: Harper and Row, Pubs., 1973). Useful, too, are Franklin W. Knight, *The African Dimension in Latin American Societies* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1974) and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971).
5. "Estereótipos de negros através da Literatura Brasileira," *Boletín de Sociologia* (São Paulo), no. 3 (1953):9–27.
6. *O negro na ficção brasileiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Tempo Brasileiro, 1965), and "Negro Themes and Characters in Brazilian Literature," *African Forum* 2 (Spring 1967):20–34.
7. *Negritude as a Theme in the Poetry of the Portuguese-Speaking World* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1970).
8. "Abolitionism in Brazil: Anti-Slavery and Anti-Slave," *Luso-Brazilian Review*, Winter 1972, pp. 30–45.
9. *Hispania* 58, no. 3 (September 1975): 467–580.
10. There are numerous studies and anthologies of "black poetry," from the early essays written in the 1930s and 1940s by E. Ballagas, R. Guirao, F. Ortiz, J. Juan Arróm, etc. (some reprinted by Fernández de la Vega and Pamiés in *Iniciación*, the lead-off volume in their welcome new series "Colección Ebanos y Canela") to the important work by Coulthard in the 1950s and 1960s, *Raza y color*, *Race and Colour*, and "Antecedentes de la negritud." See bibliography for titles of more recent studies.
11. Mario J. Valdés defines the term "social symbol" as a "term used to indicate the fictional characters and sometimes the actions, objects, setting and situations which through their literary portrayal, become identified with a particular social phenomenon and thus carry the extra-literary burden of protest, or merely serve as the testimony of the existence of the phenomenon" ("The Literary Social Symbol for an Interrelated Study of Mexico," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 7, no. 3 [July 1965]: 385–99).
12. Among the extensive bibliography on Carpentier is Barreda-Tomás, "Dos visiones del negro." Also see Quesada, "Desarrollo evolutivo del elemento negro" and Calixto, "El negro en la narrativa cubana."
13. For a recent study on black themes, particularly in Puerto Rico, see Coleman, "Black Themes in the Literature of the Caribbean."
14. For a detailed study of Lizardi's attacks on white racism see Bueno, "El negro en *El Periquillo Sarniento*."
15. Eneida has studied the theme of the banana companies in Central American fiction in a series of articles, "Las compañías bananeras," and in an earlier doctoral dissertation of the same title. Thompson has written a dissertation dealing, in part, with the banana companies in Central American fiction, "Anti-Imperialism as Reflected in the Prose Fiction." Also see Meléndez and Duncan, *El negro en Costa Rica*, particularly the article by Sánchez M., "El negro en la literatura costarricense," which deals with the black theme in the literature of Carlos Luis Fallas, Joaquín Gutiérrez, and others. For a detailed study of racial segregation and other racial problems in the Canal Zone and in Panama, especially in the work of Joaquín Beleño, see Pérez-Venero, "Raza, color y

- prejuicios," and her later articles, "A Novelist's Erotic Racial Revenge" and "El sistema de segregación racial." Also see Aristides Blanco, "Análisis de *Gamboa Road Gang*: novela de Joaquín Beleño (M. A. thesis, University of Panama, 1963).
16. For a comprehensive treatment of the black presence in the work of Rubén Darío, see Durand, *La Négritude* and Jackson, "La presencia negra."
 17. See Amis, "The Negro in the Colombian Novel."
 18. Unlike Siegel in "The Group of Guayaquil," Heise discusses Adalberto Ortiz as the sixth member of this group ("Society and Artistic Techniques").
 19. Eugene Perkins, "Benevolent Racism: The Oppressor as Messiah," *Black Books Bulletin* 3, no. 4 (Winter 1975):14.
 20. See Jackson, *The Black Image* and "Black Song"; Ortiz, "La negritude en la cultura latinoamericana"; and Salas and Henry, "Nicomedes Santa Cruz."
 21. See Drake, "The Black Diaspora." Important work in this regard is being done at Howard University whose professors are making major contributions to the Afro-Hispanic field through the preparation of bibliographies, publications, new programs of study, and regular conferences on the subject. More than any other, the Department of Romance Languages at Howard is fast establishing Afro-Hispanic literature to be a valid branch of Hispanic Studies. See *Blacks in Hispanic Literature: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Miriam De Costa (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1976). This volume will give deserved exposure to black scholars both established and recent. See also the numerous articles by Cobb listed in the bibliography.
 22. In "Concepts of Blackness," Cobb conceptualizes the black experience into the following minimum thematic schema: (1) confrontation with an alien and usually hostile society; (2) dualism or a sense of division between one's own sense of self and that of the dominant culture; (3) identity, a search that embraces the who am I, and (4) liberation, both spiritual and political. Boyd's "Concept of Black Esthetics" is the most extensive study to date on the relationship between ethnicity and literary esthetics.
 23. "A Short Guillén Bibliography," published by the *Center for Cuban Studies*, no. 2 (Sept. 1973):15–18, is a select bibliography of poetic works and critical studies based in part on the extensive bibliography included in the second volume of Guillén's *Obra poética (1920–1972)*. A more comprehensive bibliography is included in the collection of critical articles, *Recopilación de textos sobre Nicolás Guillén*, ed. by Nancy Morejón (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1974). Two of the most comprehensive bilingual anthologies of Guillén's poetry are the recently published Guillén, *¡Patria o Muerte! The Great Zoo and Other Poems* and *Man-making Words*. Also see Carr, *Tengo*.
 24. Keith Ellis, University of Toronto, is preparing a critical study of Guillén's poetry, and there are many doctoral theses in progress on Guillén at universities in the United States. Robert Márquez and David Arthur McMurray project a volume of Guillén's prose in English translation, to be called *Racism, Culture and Revolution: The Prose Writings of Nicolás Guillén*.
 25. In a review of Joan R. Sherman, *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1974). Farrison, *CLA Journal* 18, no. 2 (December 1974), p. 306.
 26. "The Problem of Negritude in Modern French Poetry," *Comparative Literature Studies* (1963), p. 101.

A SELECT LISTING OF CREATIVE AND CRITICAL WRITINGS

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