

CRITICA / REVIEW

Dorothy E. Mosby, *Place, Language and Identity in Afro-Costa Rican Literature*.
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**Mestizaje and Racial Categories as Hegemonic Forms of Representation
in Costa Rican Literature**

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Place, Language and Identity is an important work of criticism that transcends multiple disciplinary boundaries. While the conceptual framework is broadly situated within gender, race and transnational/migration and post-colonial studies, its most direct contribution will be in the rapidly growing field commonly referred to as Afro-Romance Languages or Afro-Latin Studies, which is premised on the axiom that peoples of African descent in the Spanish, French, and Portuguese Diaspora have had a significant historical and cultural impact on Latin American and Caribbean societies.

Throughout Latin America the social exclusion of Blacks or people of African descent from the history, political economy and civil society through hegemonic discourse articulated through projects such as “racial democracy” has been an attempt to socially neutralize and marginalize the African presence in the Americas. Social invisibility takes many forms such as exclusion from the national culture; lack of government acknowledgment or underestimation of census numbers; exclusion from participation in politics, media, and civil society; and lack of recognition of their contribution to the history, culture or national identity. Blacks are socially cleansed from the ‘official history’ except for references to slavery, sports or music (Dixon 79).

In particular, Afro-Hispanic literary productions and works that configure or address the image of Afro-Latin peoples within narrative texts or subtexts are often ignored, marginalized, considered problematic, or rendered “socially invisible” in Latin American literary discourse. For example, Afro-Romance and Afro Latin writers have not yet been integrated into the curricula of most major universities in the United States, Latin America or Spain. The notable exceptions are Nicolás Guillén or Nancy Morejón from Cuba (Lewis, 2). For example, a literature course on Latin America would not normally include the critical works of the Afro Ecuadorian writer Nelson Estupiñan Bass or the Afro Colombian Manuel Zapata Olivella.

According to Richard Jackson, Afro Hispanic writers are overlooked or socially excluded by the traditional Hispanic literary canon because their writing is considered too specific in its themes on the black experience (Jackson, 104). Therefore, the issue is not only inclusion in civil society, but inclusion within the canon of Hispanic literature. Jackson argues that as black literature emerges, it will continue to offer a challenge for admission into the canon worthy of Hispanic texts.

This point deserves further elaboration. Within the broad parameters of literary discourse, a longstanding contentious debate rages on what constitutes a literary canon, its inclusions and exclusions, as well as when and where subjects enter recognized cultural “space” and how such points of entrance are crucial to textual interrogation. This debate is central to Afro-Hispanic and other literary critics. Trevor Ross defines a canon as “a body of writing or other creative work that has been recognized as standard or authoritative” (Ross, 514). John Gilroy adds that the term canon has “suggested to its

users a principle of selection by which some authors or text were worthier of preservation than others” (Gilroy, 233). Therefore, works that focus on and analyze critically Afro-Hispanic cultural production are crucial because they intervene in culturally resognized space, and by doing so, reshape and reconstruct the imagery of black peoples in Latin America.

Mosby’s work interrupts the traditional Hispanic literary discourse from two distinct, but corresponding points: gender and race. Afro-Hispanic writers—both women and men— have been effectively excluded from the Latin American literary canon. Therefore, her work should be seen as an attempt to include the works Afro-Latin peoples into the broader literary discourse.

Through the lens of gender and race, Mosby is able to advance Latin American literary discourse to new levels. Her work is not only a critical interrogation of the Afro-Hispanic tradition, but also an attempt to include Afro-Hispanic literature by both women and men in the Latin American canon. Additionally, her work constitutes a new and fresh departure in that she expands the scope of the Latin American literary terrain through a detailed examination of Afro-Costa Rican women writers like the established poet Eulalia Bernard as well as a newer generation represented by Shirley Campbell and Delia McDonald. While there are published articles on the Afro-Costa Rican women, like Bernard and Campbell, Mosby’s work constitutes one of the first comprehensive texts on black women writers primarily focused on Costa Rica within the Afro-Hispanic literary canon.

In general she concentrates on the “literary contributions of Afro-Costa Rican writers and how their treatment of place, language and nation configure a cultural identity

that is no longer West Indian and is in contestation with the dominant Europeanized culture of Costa Rica (3).” The author first provides a basic historical overview on the West Indian presence in Costa Rica. The reader is reminded that English-speaking Afro-Costa Ricans on the Atlantic Coast are culturally and ethnically descended from the Caribbean blacks who arrived to work for the British and North American banana companies, roughly in 1872. Along with interrogating the works of women like Bernard, Campbell, and McDonald, Mosby also explores the writings of Alderman Johnson Roden, Dolores Joseph, and Quince Duncan, possibly the most studied black writer from the Spanish-speaking world.

Her point of departure is Stuart Hall’s theory of cultural identity, which posits, “cultural identity ... is a matter of becoming as well as being. It belongs to the past as well as to the future. It is not something that already exist transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (Hall, 5). Mosby argues that identity “in process” is best understood through the examination of literature. “Cultural identity changes from one that is of a dislocated West Indian population to the development and an expression of an Afro-Costa Rican one. This cultural identity did not emerge out of nowhere and in fact does have a history that we can observe in the views expressed by writers from different generations through their attitudes towards the West Indies and Costa Rica (6).”

Mosby approaches the issue of place, language and identity from a postcolonial critical perspective “to cover all of the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present” (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, 2). She argues that

this perspective is essential, “considering the history of European settlement in Costa Rica. The experience of colonization has formed the dominant ideology of “whiteness” or *blanqueamiento* that renders invisible other ethnic groups in the country (4).” She suggests that Afro-Costa Rican writers from different historical periods express their relation to place, language, and identity as a "process," a transformation partly due to socio-historical circumstances and partly in reaction against the national myths of whiteness in the dominant Hispanic culture.

It is important to point out that Afro-Costa Ricans are not culturally or ethnically homogenous. Before the arrival of Afro-Costa Ricans of Anglophone descent there existed a small black ‘Hispanized’ population that was ‘absorbed’ into the population through the process of mestizaje. Therefore, cultural distinctions are made between the two groups. Mosby’s inquiry, therefore, is limited to and focused on works by blacks of West Indian descent who were born outside Costa Rica but now live and write there as well as literature by Afro-Costa Ricans of Anglophone Caribbean descent.

The author first explores in chapter one the oral traditions of the African informed tricksters tales, the English poetry of Alderman Johnson and ethnographic sketches of Dolores Joseph as a basis to establish a literary frame to examine second and third generations writers, like Eulalia Bernard, Quince Duncan, Shirley Campbell and Delia McDonald.

Through an analysis of Afro-Costa Rican literary works, both poetry and narrative, the author argues that as “concepts” they reveal the “process” of West Indian cultural identity and transformation into Afro-Costa Rican and Hispanic identities.

The work of Eulalia Bernard, born in 1935 to a daughter of Jamaican parents, represents “the historical trajectory of the experience of West Indian blacks in Costa Rica – from temporary foreign labor, the extension of citizenship to blacks in 1948, to struggles for visibility in the 1990’s (76).” According to the author, Bernard’s poetry is defined by the presence of exclamations, marked rhythms, and wordplay in English, Spanish, and Limonese Creole (Limon, thus Limonese, a small town located on the Atlantic side of Costa Rica and an important cultural site for Afro-Costa Ricans). Bernard’s main collection of poetry has been published in three collections. *Rimohéroe* (1984), *My Black King* (1991), and *Ciénaga* (2001), combined with her essay on political philosophy, all focus on the cultural connections between Africa and the Americas. In *Ciénaga*, her most recent work, places “black women at the center of the poetic discourse...as they speak of the celebration of women’s role in liberation struggles, community building, and of women’s sexuality (78).”

Shirley Campbell, born in 1965, is the most renowned of the new (post 1948) generation of Afro Costa Rican writers. Her work expresses “black identity and Costa Rican nationality and exposes the points of discord between two cultural positions” (168). Campbell’s *Naciendo* (Being Born, 1988) and *Rotundamente negra* (Absolutely Black, 1994), “turn from West Indian orality of Bernard towards reflections on being “young gifted and black” in Costa Rica and asserting place and nation (169).”

However, there are important differences between Bernard and Campbell. According to Mosby, “unlike the overt embrace of the masculine subject’s glory in the work of Eulalia Bernard, the male figure appears as an equal partner...there is no obvious, overt rejection or acceptance of feminism, but a definite valorization of the

female body, control of sensuality and sexuality and the use of erotic in poetic expressions” in Campbell’s work (180). Additionally, her cultural production is in Spanish and she does not fuse English or Creole words in her work.

I looked at my skin
with a dark tone
an immense tone
I suddenly discovered in my blood
a grandmother
a women
and a long row
of mothers singing
and a black land
sown by them
and I grew
and I became big like the stars
I became long like the roads
I understand myself as a woman
a black woman.

[me miré la piel
con un tono oscuro
con un tono inmenso
describí en mi sangre

de pronto una abuela
 a una hembra
 y una hilera largra
 de madres cantando
 y una tierra negra
 sembrada por ellas
 y me crecí
 y me hice grande como las estrellas
 me hice larga como los caminos
 me entendí mujer
 una mujer negra.]

In the view of Mosby, “the female strength and power in Shirley Campbell reveal a feminist consciousness that is sometimes veiled in the sensuality of her verse or maternal imagery. This consciousness is tied to a womanist perspective for the issues of gender parity, but also racial equality.” Moreover, by understanding “her femaleness and her blackness, she also brings awareness to the intersection of history, gender, and ethnicity” (208).

Delia McDonald Woolery born in 1965 in Colón, Panama is the last of the poets discussed in the text. The depth and simultaneous brevity of her work is reflected in *El séptimo círculo del obelisco* (*The Seventh Circle of the Obelisc*, poem 8, 1994).

I am:
 eyes of seed
 the weeping of a cart

fingers of the fire tree,
to burn hate.

[Soy:

ojos de semilla

llanto de carreta

dedos de árbol-fuego,

para quemar los odios.]

Delia McDonald continues the examination of blackness, history and gender in “Soy una mujer negra” (“I Am a Black Woman”), in which according to Mosby, “the poet-narrator describes her strength and permanency.”

I am a black woman

so strong

like a cedar

as strong as the sun

but even more,

I am the sea

and I must write

my name

in the sand

unending

forever,

always.

[Soy una mujer negra
tan fuerte
como un cedero
tan fuerte como el sol
pero aún más,
soy el mar
y habré de escribir
mi nombre
en las arenas,
interminables
por siempre,
siempre.]

A close textual read reveals, the inherent power “of the sea” as a metaphor for black womanhood. The comparison moves beyond a reductive simile and builds a more imaginative force in declaring, “but even more/I am the sea.” By proclaiming such a bold metaphor, “I am the sea,” the voice of the poems moves beyond human constraints (213).

Taken as a whole, Mosby’s examination of Afro-Costa Rican writing is a critical and comprehensive interrogation of some of the most important writers, poets, oral traditions, and African tales, as she is able to skillfully situate the Afro-Costa Rican text within the broader tapestry of Costa Rican social relations.

Moreover, her text presents Afro-Costa Rican writers—both women and men—and their place, language, and identity along with their corresponding shifts and transformations, as full subjects of Costa Rican and Latin American literature, and by doing so is able to contribute to multiple disciplinary debates.

Mosby's text is a feminist intervention, but not in an obvious fashion. It is informed by "feminist criticism and culturalist readings in order to reveal the operation of gender, as well as the significance of the socio-cultural contexts of the works" (4). Additionally, through the interrogation of these very important black women writers, Mosby offers a compelling and critical intervention on Afro-Latina Women writers and how such constructions challenge, interrupt, and expand the literary canon of Latin American discourse.

Employing the DuBoisian notion of double-consciousness, the author concludes, "Afro-Costa Rican writing reveals this struggle to be Costa Rican and black, which is characterized by a difficult negotiation of difference and identity. Afro-Costa Rican identity emerges as the results of migrations of a colonized population who were once the ethnic majority at "home" to a situation as neo-colonized, ethnic minority population in a country with a distinct cultural identity. These multiple dispersal constitute and inform the expression of this identity in literature (234)."

While Mosby's work is compelling, a more systematic critique or statement on mestizaje and racial categories, as hegemonic symbols and forms of representations within the broad patterns of Costa Rican literature would have been quite useful.


One useful point of intervention is: how does mestizaje serve to construct the social imagery of blacks in popular culture or literature in Costa Rica? Analysis or commentaries on such questions would have presented the reader with a different angle to view and possibly appreciate the mosaic of Afro-Costa Ricans as writers and citizens. Nonetheless, *Place, Language and Identity in Afro-Costa Rican Literature* is a valuable contribution to multiple disciplines like Women, Afro-Latin America, Afro-Hispanic/Diaspora literary studies, transnational migration literature, Caribbean and Latin American studies.

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