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Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba
(review)

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A pesar de marcar hitos importantes en la vigorosa producción de las poetas cubanas de todos los tiempos, el recorrido por la poesía social femenina omite algunas poetas mayores que han surgido en el exilio. *Vocación de Cassandra* cumple una tarea importante en las letras cubanas: iniciar la re-escritura de *Lo cubano en la poesía* desde la barrera del género, y poner el acento en una de las voces poéticas más valientes e importantes del presente siglo.

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Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds. *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. 200 pp.

This publication appears as part of a series launched by the University Press of Florida on all aspects of socialist Cuba, edited by John Kirk. It represents an ongoing attempt by the authors to provide information on topics related to race on the island. Their present book consists of interviews with black Cubans of distinct ages, backgrounds, interests, and political convictions, though all are professionals. The interviews themselves were conducted between 1995 and 1997. Stubbs and Pérez Sarduy offer the reader views from those with firsthand experience on the nature of racial problems and how they might best be addressed. The authors describe their publication as falling between disciplines, neither a social science study, literary text, or historical narrative, but drawing from all of these fields.

The preface to *Afro-Cuban Voices* underscores the importance of racial issues in contemporary Cuba. It notes the ongoing lack of information on the subject and recognizes that racial friction has increased in the 1990s. The long introduction consists of an essay on literature related to race in Cuba. This section is impressive, demonstrating the authors' thorough command of secondary literature. It begins by touching upon subjects including the effect of involvement in the Angolan civil war on racial discourse and the effects of the "special period" on job opportunities in the black community. After providing an overview of the book's contents, the introduction continues with a summary of racial attitudes throughout Latin America as they developed in colonial times. It underscores the fact that Afro-Cubans have been commenting on their social circumstances in published sources for well over a century, but that such literature remains largely unknown. The authors comment on the similarities between racial stereotypes in Cuba and Brazil, then analyze specifically Cuban-related studies. The introduction ends with a critique of existing literature on racial matters written on the island, noting that Afro-Cubans

themselves generally find it superficial, dogmatic, and not sufficiently focused on the present.

The interviews themselves are divided into three sections, “The Lived Experience of Race,” “The Representations of Race,” and “Race and Identity.” Part I concentrates primarily on older interviewees. Chapter 1 considers the life of retired journalist Reynaldo Peñalver, his early years in poverty, and the tremendous obstacles he overcame to become educated. Chapter 2 recounts episodes in the lives of industrial chemist Elpidio de la Trinidad Molina, his wife Egipcia Pérez, and their son Jorge. Chapter 3 includes interviews with doctors of different class backgrounds and ages, Liliam Cordiés Jackson and Nuria Pérez Sesma. While grateful for what they have been able to accomplish under the revolution, they recognize that few publications exist on racial matters within their country and that no forum for public discussion of race is currently available.

Part II explores racial representations in Cuban fiction and the mass media. Print journalist Marta Rojas is featured in chapter 4 with an account of her involvement in the 1953 Moncada trial as well as more recent professional aspirations. Scriptwriter Eliseo Altunaga appears in chapter 5. He discusses biased depictions of Antonio Maceo in the work of Cuban historians and discrimination against Afro-Cuban religions, among other topics. Chapter 6 focuses on actress Elvira Cervera and her experiences with discrimination in radio broadcasting. This is one of the most critical essays, ending with her decision to create an all-black drama troupe as a reaction to the marginalization of Afro-Cuban dramatists. Chapter 7 considers the career of screen actor Alden Knight. He is also highly critical of the present, mentioning that the black community has no authority within the power structure of the media. This section ends with an interview of the poet Georgina Herrera (chapter 8), who began writing after growing up in poverty in Jovellanos, Matanzas.

Part III contains some of the most widely known interviewees. It begins with filmmaker Gloria Rolando’s comments in chapter 9 on how difficult it has been for her to receive approval for projects with Afro-Cuban subject matter in the national film institute (ICAIC). She is followed by Juan Benkomo (chapter 10), a drum maker and *santero* who has suffered persecution as a result of his religious beliefs. Chapter 11 continues with anecdotes from the career of Guillermina Ramos Cruz and the difficulties she has experienced attempting to study African-derived culture in Cuba. Afro-Cuban specialist Rogelio Martínez Furé is cited in chapter 12, critiquing the term “Latin American” as exclusionary and noting the racism frequently implicit in the use of the terms “Cuban” and “Afro-Cuban.” He underscores the fact that there is no homogeneous “Cuban culture” and calls for a greater celebration of the fact. The thoughts of author Nancy Morejón (chapter 13) end the book. She reflects on

the concept of the African diaspora and its meanings for African Americans throughout the hemisphere. She shares her thoughts on the state of black intellectual development within Cuba and—as in the case of Martínez Furé—comments on the implicit, unconscious racism evident in many forms of national discourse.

More than anything else, *Afro-Cuban Voices* does an excellent job of problematizing the concept of “the Afro-Cuban community” and “the Afro-Cuban perspective,” providing the reader with a surprisingly wide spectrum of distinct views and life experiences. It does the international community a service in this sense by offering relatively direct access to a few of the countless voices in Cuba that have no means of making themselves heard. The writing style is clear and easy to read, and the content highly significant. I found the testimonies to be very compelling. For instance, I was amazed to discover how many middle-aged Cubans had grandparents who were born into slavery and had been told firsthand about that period when they were young. The sense of awareness among Afro-Cubans about the extent of suffering in their recent past and the gains they have achieved over the past century is striking. Equally noteworthy are their views on the ways they have benefited from the revolution and the areas in which it has failed to meet expectations. While the interviews provide more basic information than synthetic analysis, it is information that has been sorely lacking. *Afro-Cuban Voices* is an important work for all those interested in contemporary race relations and one I highly recommend.

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María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno. *Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century*. With a new introduction by Elizabeth Dore. Edited by Daisy Rubiera Castillo. Translated by Anne McLean. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000. 182 pp.

This testimonial history by María de los Reyes Castillo Bueno (1902–1997), *Reyita*, provides a unique perspective on Cuba’s past, interpreting it through the often-disregarded experiences of a black woman. Like the best testimonial literature, Reyita’s clear, matter-of-fact narrative, translated from the original published in Cuba in 1996, offers a refreshing break from the traditions in Cuban social scholarship that generalize the experiences of all women and all blacks. She represents another of the voices from below, the most alienated segments of Cuban society. Within Cuban studies, *Reyita* can be viewed as a continuation of the classic tales of Esteban Montejo in *Autobiography of a*