
In Carnival and National Identity in the Poetry of Afrocubanismo, Thomas F. Anderson offers an even reading of what he terms “afrocubanista poetry”—poems focusing on African-inspired themes that were written in Cuba in the early decades of the twentieth century. His choice of poems is varied and thoughtful, including some by familiar Cuban writers such as Alejo Carpentier and Nicolás Guillén and others by more obscure writers such as Felix B. Caignet. Anderson acknowledges that he does not linger on the poems’ formal qualities such as meter and rhyme schemes, but instead examines the taut historical and racial interaction among the performers, the politicians, and the bourgeoisie associated with various forms of Cuba’s carnivals.

Historically, the text is bracketed on one end by the 1912 Racist Massacre in which traditional Afro-Cuban comparsas, feared as a degenerate hodge-podge of Africanized religion and culture, were suppressed, and on the other with the year 1953, when Marcelino Arozarena wrote “Carnaval de Santiago.” What comes to light is racism toward black Cubans, born of a fear of their combination of religion and culture, that lingered for years after the massacre of 1912. It is a grim bias that ripples through many other Afrocubanista works, and the prejudice touches even prominent members of society such as Fernando Ortiz. Anderson’s translation of a section of Ortiz’s Los negros brujos reveals his “condemnation of brujería, a term that he used liberally to refer to a wide variety of Afro-Cuban rites, rituals, and cultural manifestations.” He continues: “The first thing, then, in the fight against brujería has to be to do away with brujos, to isolate them from their faithful…Once those frauds are extinct…they will be able to…go about lightening their as-of-yet deafenarianized minds from the weight of their muddled superstitions and ascend the successive zones of culture” (p. 40).

The term “lightening” becomes a trope throughout the book. It refers figuratively here to Ortiz’s equating dark skin with backward beliefs that he understood as cultural contagion, but it also refers literally to the farolas, giant paper lanterns carried on poles that sometimes towered up to ten feet high and that are mentioned in a few poems. Ortiz later shifts his views, and (en)lightening becomes an ironic symbol of the contribution to
Cuban culture by Afro-Cubans that the Cuban bourgeoisie often refused to acknowledge even though it became a source of their own entertainment in “white” carnival.

The study is strongest when all elements of art and performance interact, producing a conversation between the poem in its original language, the English translation, the artwork that sometimes accompanies the poems, and the final analysis. In his interpretation of Álvaro de Villa’s poem “La comparsa,” Anderson lingers on de Villa’s evocation of “quintessential images . . . such as the giant farolas, the booming drums, and the drunken hordes of dancers” (p. 264). He points out de Villa’s exaltation of “the comparsa as nothing less than a divine Cuban institution . . . a ‘Holy Trinity’ of drum, farola, and dancing feet—that the exile community has lost forever” (p. 264). In these moments, Carnival and National Identity, moving from historical events to literary and cultural interpretation, becomes as inclusive and complex as the performances in the poems it examines. Complicated and loaded terms such as abakuá and juegos are stringently catalogued and examined, so various meanings for juegos ripple forth, including its meaning as a “rite,” “ritual,” “a set” (as in a set of batá drums), “dances,” “ceremonies,” and “performances related to the ťáńigis” (p. 58). These etymological complications become “afrocubanista poetry” writ small.

It is when the political aspects of Cuban culture interact with its performative elements, however, that the book achieves its full potential. Chapter 5 reveals Cuban politicians’ move to hire political comparsas as seen in José Zacarías Tallet’s “Quintín Barahona.” Not without stereotypical faults, “Quintín Barahona” features the eponymous black Cuban who speaks in “highly exaggerated bozal speech” (p. 144). The local government recruits Quintín and his cornet to participate in a political comparsa during the electoral campaign. The poem’s narrator wonders why Quintín would play his cornet for white politicians who disparage his beliefs and traditions, and finally “posits that [Quintín] must be secretly paying homage to Obatalá—one of the most important deities of the Yoruban pantheon who is at once the god of creation” (p. 145). When the narrator eventually points out that Quintín “is nothing but a black Cuban,” Anderson notes the corresponding “relative worthlessness of blacks in Cuban society and the fruitlessness of their involvement with the nation’s major political parties” (p. 153). The final stanza offers Quintín’s ineffectual revenge: he accepts the white politician’s money to play in the comparsa, but does not vote. His father’s
death in the 1912 Racist Massacre surely influences his decision. Quintín’s cornet performance is not just performance but also a lament; his playing “symbolize[s] the ‘hot air,’ . . . of politicians who . . . had made many bold promises that they either could not or would not keep” (p. 155). Quintín’s refusal to vote comes from his view that it would effect little change. Such readings, in which Anderson enters the minds of the poems’ narrators, are where his interpretations shine. In these moments he successfully plumbs the position of the Afro-Cuban performer and brings into sharp relief the way politicians historically sought to affect all elements of Cuban culture.

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