

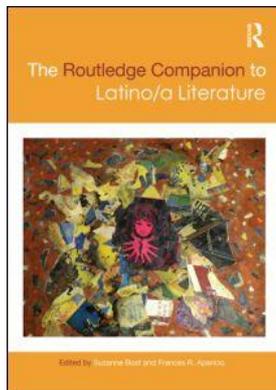
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On: 17 Apr 2021

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

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The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature

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Afro-Latino/a Literature and Identity

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203097199.ch3>

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Published online on: 30 Aug 2012

How to cite :- William Luis. 30 Aug 2012, *Afro-Latino/a Literature and Identity from: The Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature* Routledge

Accessed on: 17 Apr 2021

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203097199.ch3>

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3

AFRO-LATINO/A LITERATURE AND IDENTITY

William Luis

Afro-Latino identity refers to the writers and traditions their ancestors have passed down to them and other Latinos, and these customs have become an integral part of a broader understanding of a national culture or Caribbean community, enjoyed by people of all races. This broader concept of Afro-Latino literature and identity represents a counter-discourse to a homogenizing understanding of culture, insofar as it expresses stories or narratives about those who have been historically marginalized. While history is tied to the past and slow to evolve, literature is another and perhaps more representative version of history, as proposed by the authors and the works they write. In fact, literature is a way of writing or rewriting history. Afro-Latino identity in particular sets the groundwork for questioning the hegemonic positionality to which Afro-Latinos and non-Afro-Latinos can subscribe.

The presence of an Afro-Hispanic literature and identity in Spanish America includes writers from diverse countries such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Panama, among others, and argues for the existence of the same dynamic elements among Afro-Latinos in the United States. I refer to Afro-Latinos as people of Afro-Hispanic ancestry, whose parents were born and raised in a Spanish-speaking country of the Americas and later migrated to the United States, where their progenies were born or reared and educated. Afro-Hispanics are tied more to their culture of origin and tend to write in Spanish; Afro-Latinos have been nurtured in US culture and express themselves through the language and culture of their adopted country, although some also write in Spanish and speak to issues pertinent to their parents' country of origin. And with the passage of time, as they immerse themselves in mainland politics and society, Afro-Hispanics can become Afro-Latinos.

Afro-Caribbean people make up an overwhelming portion of Afro-Latino writing and for this reason this study will focus on their literary production. The migration and exile of large numbers of Caribbean people, mainly from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, from the nineteenth century to the contemporary period, also created a sizable diasporic population of people of African descent. Cuba and Puerto Rico belonged to Spain's last colonies, and they continued to be slave

territories with sizable populations of Africans and their descendants. Many of the early travelers were political exiles, who left their country of provenance for the host country to continue the fight against the Spanish colonial system. Others, some tobacco workers, migrated as cigar companies set up shops in cities such as Tampa, New York, and Key West. With the passage of time, these and other groups intermingled with all sectors of the dominant population, including African-Americans, and people of Afro-Hispanic descent negotiated an Afro-Latino identity.

How Afro-Hispanics living in the United States negotiate an Afro-Latino identity becomes meaningful when exploring the intercultural and racial conditions between the country of origin and the adopted homeland. Back home, citizens of African descent were encouraged to abandon their black identity in favor of a more inclusive notion of the nation and the national. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) is applicable, for the national is defined by an intellectual elite community who equates its values with those belonging to the emerging nation, therefore obligating marginal communities to forsake their sense of distinctiveness. The caste system operative during the colonial period became a fundamental component of the national discourse and supported white superiority and black inferiority. Racial whitening was the only road to social, economic, and political mobility. There were black organizations in the early chapters of Cuba's history, such as the *cabildos* or mutual aid societies that were transformed into *Sociedades de Color*, but all sought the same opportunities and lifestyles known to their white counterparts. Other associations, such as religious groups, preserved their traditions, but these were considered to be "backward" and marginal to the dominant discourse.

The racial differences on the island were reinforced and even augmented on the mainland. In nineteenth-century New York there were sharp contrasts among the Masonic lodges: the *Caballeros de la Luz* was organized by factory owners, and the *Sol de Cuba* was integrated by Cubans of African descent. There were other Afro-Hispanic groups, such as the *Logia El Progreso* (previously *Logia Carlos Manuel de Céspedes*) and *Las Dos Antillas*. Later, the *Sol de Cuba* was transformed into the *Prentice Hall Lodge No. 38*, with members from many of the cities' black communities. Afro-Puerto Ricans Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, Francisco Gonzalo (Pachín) Marín, and Sotero Figueroa held leadership positions in some of these organizations.

Cuba even had an Afro-Cuban political party, the *Partido de los Independientes de Color* (1908), under the leadership of Evaristo Estenoz and Pedro Ivonet. The goal was to secure the rights promised to Afro-Cubans for their participation in the War of Independence (1868–78, 1895–8). However, after the founding of the Republic of Cuba in 1902, their requests for equality continued to be ignored. Members of the party were accused of inciting a rebellion in 1912 and the national army killed an estimated 6,000 party members, an act that discouraged any other black identity movement for generations to come. The US government, through the Platt Amendment of Cuba's constitution, relied on a military presence to protect US interests and monitored political activities on the island, including those associated with the *Partido de los Independientes de Color*.

The US control of the colony of Puerto Rico resulted in the displacement of Puerto Ricans to the mainland. This was especially the case after World War II, with

Operation Bootstrap, a program that provided economic incentives for companies to set up factories and industrialize the island. Instead, they created a demographic nightmare, as many Puerto Ricans, including significant numbers of Afro-Puerto Ricans, were forced to abandon the island and seek employment in the adopted country.

René Marqués's *Cuentos puertorriqueños de hoy* (1959) gathers the voices of writers of his generation who best represent the period that affected and displaced a disproportionate number of Afro-Puerto Ricans. José Luis González's "En el fondo del caño hay un negrito," Emilio Díaz Valcárcel's "Sol negro," and Edwin Figueroa's "Aguinaldo negro" dared to uncover the racial conditions of an island culture that considered all Puerto Ricans to be equal. The issue of racism was brought to the fore by Isabelo Zenón Cruz's controversial *Narciso descubre su trasero* (1974), a blatant denunciation of the racist nuances of Puerto Rican culture, and a few years later by José Luis González's *El país de los cuatro pisos* (1980), outlining the contributions made by Afro-Puerto Ricans.

The Dominican Republic has a unique history. It declared its independence not from Spain but from Haiti in 1844, but was reincorporated as a Spain colony from 1861 to 1865. Race became an oppositional space to foster a sense of national identity dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo exploited during his rule, from 1930 to 1961. Many Dominicans are descendants of slaves brought to Hispaniola during the Spanish colonial period and Haitians during the 22-year occupation. Yet Dominicans embrace an Indian identity, not the black identity that they attribute to their Haitian neighbors. To solidify his power and preserve a sense of Dominicanness, Trujillo orchestrated the massacre of Haitians living along the River Masacre, also home to many dark-skinned Dominicans. Freddy Prestol Castillo's *El masacre se pasa a pie* (1974) and Edwin Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998) refer to this tragic period in their countries' histories, resulting in the deaths of some 20,000 Haitians. Therefore, Dominican identity is based on being Indian and not black or Haitian, although the two nations share a similar African ancestry.

Contact between the Dominican Republic and the United States can be traced to the US occupation of the country, between 1916 and 1924, and the exchanges Dominicans like the Henríquez Ureña family – Francisco and his children Max, Pedro, Francisco, and Camila – had with the United States. Julia Alvarez's novel, *In the Name of Salomé* (2000), narrates parts of this important period of the Dominican Republic, beginning with the life of Salomé Ureña, the country's national poet, and her marriage to Francisco Henríquez y Carvajal, who later became the president of the republic (1916). In *Literatura dominicana en los Estados Unidos* (2001), Daisy Cocco de Felippis and Franklin Gutiérrez refer to the Henríquez Ureña family but also to other early travelers such as Fabio Fiallo, Manuel Florentino Cestero, Jesusa Alfau Galván de Solalinde, and Gustavo E. Bergés Bordas, among others, thus showing the constant contact between the two nations. Trujillo controlled the country as his own plantation, but some Dominicans were able to leave their homeland during his reign. The migration increased after his execution, and even in greater numbers after the US occupation in 1965, many traveling to Caribbean cities such as New York.

Hispanics and Afro-Hispanics in the United States tend to associate more closely with their national or linguistic groups. As foreigners they experience linguistic

prejudices by monolingual English speakers who demand total conformity, since newcomers do not fit into their “imagined community.” And Afro-Hispanics and Latinos are exposed to racial categorization, the same ones African-Americans have had to endure. With the racial tension that erupted in the 1950s and 1960s, the height of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, dark-skinned immigrants had more difficulties navigating mainstream society than their lighter-skinned counterparts. And as in the previous century, they were welcomed by and found refuge in the African-American community. With their numbers and racial complexions and complexities, they are redefining what it is to be black in the United States.

The Afro-Latinos’ identity and literature reference the racial politics present in the adopted country, but without obviating their presence in the place of origin. Arturo Alfonso Schomburg stands out as the first and most important Afro-Latino figure to bridge the gap between Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the United States. As a member of Las Dos Antillas Political Club, he opposed Spain’s control over Cuba and Puerto Rico. He went on to promote the accomplishments of people of African descent and collected their works. He authored *Plácido a Cuban Martyr* (1909), about the Afro-Cuban poets execution for allegedly masterminding the Ladder Conspiracy rebellion (1844), co-founded with John Edward Bruce The Negro Society for Historical Research (1911), and with Daniel Alexander Payne Murray co-edited the *Encyclopedia of the Colored Race* (1912). Though Schomburg and others promoted the racial equality expounded by José Martí, he also understood the racial divisions at home and abroad, and dedicated his life to celebrating the accomplishments of people of color. He is remembered as a distinguished bibliophile of African-American works and an influential figure during the Harlem Renaissance.

Schomburg’s compatriot, Jesús Colón, was one of the first to write about Puerto Ricans and race matters in the United States. Although he and Bernardo Vega were both tobacco workers and believed in the socialist cause, Colón was visibly an Afro-Puerto Rican and was treated as an African-American. Indeed, Colón is conscious of his dark complexion in a country that judges a person by the color of his skin. In *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches* (1961), Colón conveys his experiences on the mainland. In “The Mother, the Young Daughter, Myself and All of Us,” Colón, while drinking coffee at a popular public location, overhears a conversation in which the mother encourages her daughter to occupy an available stool next to Colón, and the daughter’s response, indicating her refusal to sit next to a “nigger.” The daughter expresses a lesson she learned at home or in her community. Surprisingly, the mother does not correct the child’s behavior, which reflects upon her own conduct and education. The incident happens to Colón, but in the story’s title the reader is left to wonder who are the “Us.” We know the identity of “the Mother,” “the Young Daughter,” and “Myself,” but who are “and All of Us”? The first person plural pronoun refers to Colón and, perhaps, everyone else like him, indicating that we, those of us who can be called “niggers,” are susceptible to racial discrimination. The expletive the daughter enunciates is a word the mother and the rest of the customers in the coffee shop, and by extension the society, have articulated. Let us consider that there is only one seat available next to Colón, which remained unoccupied before and after the time of narration.

Piri Thomas's classic *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) exposed the racial prejudice prevalent in Puerto Rican society, silenced by many for the sake of projecting a unified notion of a Puerto Rican community or Puerto Ricanness. Indeed, race is an issue that contaminates the Puerto Rican family. Piri tells the reader that, like his father, he was the darkest member of the family and felt discriminated against, an accusation his mother and siblings denied. Piri refers to his immediate family and to the Puerto Rican society in general. In this regard, the novel reflects upon a situation in New York, but the reader wonders about the family response, if the same situation unfolded in Puerto Rico. The novel seems to indicate that the condition would be repeated on the island; the mother and society would be equally persuasive in dismissing the charge, and the protagonist would feel more conflicted about contextualizing his isolation. Piri's struggle with his family and community led him to identify with his African-American friend, Brew, with whom he journeys to the perceived origin of racial tension, the South. He experiences how African-Americans are treated in that part of the United States. The voyage into the lower circles of a US version of Dante's *Inferno* validates what he knew and witnessed with his own family.

The bridge between the African-American and Afro-Puerto Rican communities was also crossed by one of the controversial leaders of the Young Lords Party, Felipe Luciano. Luciano clearly understood that the fate of the Puerto Rican people in New York, and in particular those of African descent, was linked to the destiny of African-Americans. The 1971 short film *Right On!*, with Luciano, Gylan Kain and David Nelson, shows how the Last Poets celebrate their blackness through poetry, an identity issue his African-American brothers have helped Luciano resolve. Luciano also understood that his own cause is much broader and includes all Puerto Ricans. In the film, Luciano recites "Jíbaro/My Pretty Nigger," "Hey Now," and "Puerto Rican Rhythms." The first poem, "Jíbaro," arguably his best, highlights the Puerto Rican search for identity through African-American speech. Luciano considers Puerto Ricans as blacks and applies the term "nigger" to the outcast "Jíbaro," whom the speaker appropriates as the symbol of Puerto Rican diaspora experience. Though the poem starts out in the language of origin, Spanish, it takes the vernacular and submerges it in the underground of the New York City subway system, where he looks for the Jíbaro in an African-American performative English. The Jíbaro cannot escape, and he belongs to the poetic voice as he repeats "And I'll never let you go," and concludes with an expression that reflects the African-American side of Afro-Latino identity, "never nigger."

Willie Perdomo's "Nigger-Reecan Blues," which relies on the same linguistic and cultural terms employed by Luciano, also conveys how dark-skinned Puerto Ricans define their identity while living in a society that does not make distinctions between black and white gradations. One of the speakers, a racially oppressed African-American, informs his Puerto Rican friend that, despite his own belief to claim a Puerto Rican national identity, in the United States he is just another black. The speaker, Willie, in his defense, recognizes that a cab driver and a lady holding tight to her purse treat him as if he were black. And whether he accepts his blackness or not, he proposes that a "Spic" is also black.

The traditional structures of blackness become problematic with the Puerto Rican experience. Whereas Esmeralda Santiago may claim some blackness, as conveyed by

the endearing name known to her protagonist, Negri, in *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993), she was able to overcome many of the obstacles that scar people of color, which may explain the relatively small numbers of Afro-Latino authors. She and other writers such as Judith Ortiz Cofer, attempt to negotiate a broader understanding of blackness, but there is little measure of comparison between them, who tend to idealize a Puerto Rican homeland, and the experiences of Nuyorican writers, who resolved their identity issues by accepting the harsh racial conditions of New York City. This other side is represented by the title of Tato Laviera's much cited *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* (1979), suggesting that a return to an idealized notion of Puerto Rico is no longer an option, a decision made explicit by the closing lines of Miguel Piñero's "A Lower Eastside Poem" (1987):

I don't wanna be buried in Puerto Rico
 I don't wanna rest in Long Island Cemetery
 I wanna be near the stabbing shooting
 gambling fighting & unnatural dying
 & new birth crying
 so please when I die ...
 don't take me far away
 keep me near by
 take my ashes and scatter them thru out
 the Lower East Side ...

(Piñero 2010: 5)

Santiago and Ortiz Cofer have made the adopted country their home, but their works represent a connection to a Puerto Rican childhood that is absent of racial categorizations. In some respects, that past was closed off to Nuyorican writers who were accused of not being "real" Puerto Ricans, as portrayed in the film *Piñero* (2001), when the main character and his friends return to the island and are treated as foreigners by their own compatriots. Piñero accuses them of ignoring their own identity and being blind to the US control over the island. On the other hand, Marta Moreno Vega's *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* (2004) underscores some of the conflicts evident in Piri Thomas's family; her sister Socorro and their mother are light-skinned while the protagonist, her brother Chachito, and father have dark complexions. The protagonist's Abuela Luisa, a descendant of María de la O, from Loiza Aldea (a town known to Afro-Puerto Ricans), alleged to be a slave – "una africana de verdad" – represented spiritism and African religion in Puerto Rican culture. The Afro-Latino aspect of Caribbean culture is present in Latin music, Afro-Cuban and Afro-Puerto Rican religions in New York, and towards the end of the novel by her African-American friend, Donna Stokes. Although Mr Bloomstein mocks the protagonist's accent, when she then runs out of the classroom, Donna also leaves and reassures her friend that Spanish accent is a cultural marker she also wants to imitate. Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa's *Daughters of the Stone* (2009) narrates the lives of Afro-Puerto Rican women and their stories of survivability.

Tato Laviera is arguably the best writer to recognize that he belongs to both US and Puerto Rican cultures, and most recently to neither one; "Nideaquinideallá"

(which translates as “neitherfromherenorfromthere”), a term that indicates geographic, linguistic, and transcultural dislocation and remapping. As I have stated elsewhere, “no place” becomes a home with its own hybrid identities. But Laviera, who writes in Spanish, English, and Spanglish, tackles the race issue in the place of origin and in the adopted homeland. Laviera objects to the racist ignorance of Puerto Rican culture in his “Tesis de Negreza,” a song and poem about the assassination of a black thick-lipped man by a white Puerto Rican based on the song “Negro Bembón,” ironically made popular by famed Afro-Puerto Rican musicians Ismael Miranda and Rafael Cortijo. While the song has made inroads into popular culture, entertaining many regardless of where they reside, very few Puerto Ricans pay close attention to the lyrics, which justify the homicide. Laviera reproduces the song in its entirety but intercalates a response in the stanzas, thus undermining the song’s original narrative. In fact, Laviera challenges the racial classifications imposed during the colonial period that seem to have infiltrated Puerto Rican culture. Inventive words such as “lobo,” “albarazado,” “carpa mulato,” “cambujo,” “tente en el aire,” “no te entiendo,” or “bembón” are derogatory and only serve to humiliate blacks, as the policeman’s act suggests by retracting his thick lips and accepting white culture. Laviera ends his poem with a sense of racial pride not unlike those proclaimed by Afro-Latinos living in New York.

Laviera’s Afro-Latino poems are a testament to Afro-Puerto Rican solidarity with African-American culture, not as outsiders, but from within. When Laviera began to celebrate his Afro-Latino identity, New York had become another Caribbean city, with a significant Afro-Latino component. This is evident in the popularity of Latin music, as highlighted in Oscar Hijuelos’s *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989) and the movie based on the book, *The Mambo Kings* (1992), which featured Celia Cruz and Tito Puente. Laviera’s poems are rich in Caribbean rhythms and in African-American culture, a space that Afro-Puerto Ricans and African-Americans share. In “Preacher,” this religious figure welcomes Puerto Ricans into the congregation; and in “Harlem Elders Odes,” the speaker acknowledges these traditional pillars of the African-American community, whom we must cherish and not take for granted.

Afro-Cuban writing is continuous and can be traced to the nineteenth century, with the works of the slave poet Juan Francisco Manzano, the mulatto poet Gabriel de la Concepcion Valdés (Plácido), and in the twentieth century by Martín Morúa Delgado, Nicolás Guillén, Nancy Morejón, Georgina Herrera, and many others. However, after the events of 1959 ushered in a new stage in Cuba’s complex political landscape that unleashed significant waves of Cuban exiles, few Afro-Cubans abandoned the island and even fewer have narrated their experiences. The vast majority of exiles that did leave in the early period were affluent and of European descent. Their sons and daughters became members of a generation aptly captured by Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s *Life on the Hyphen* (1994) and Isabel Alvarez-Borland’s *Cuban-American Literature of Exile* (1998), as Cuban-Americans negotiate both sides of their exile hyphenated identities. Even on the island, Afro-Cuban writers were deterred from writing about race matters; instead they were encouraged to promote a homogeneous notion of the national, although Nancy Morejón and Georgina Herrera occasionally situated their poems in an acceptable historical context. However, other

artists living abroad draw on their blackness and Afro-Cuban roots, such as María Magdalena Campos Pons does from her Boston residence.

There were Afro-Cubans living in the United States before the Cuban revolution. Though many returned to Cuba at the conclusion of the Spanish–American War (1898), others remained on the mainland. *Black Cuban, Black American: A Memoir* (Grillo 2000) is one of the few works that provides a first-hand account of the lives of Afro-Cubans in the United States. Evelio Grillo narrates race relations in Cuba but mainly in his birth city, Tampa, the “Cigar-Making Capital of the World,” during the 1930s. He provides an archeology of the city, its culture and customs, and even identifies the streets of the “affluent white Cubans and Italians and Spaniards” and those East of Nebraska Avenue inhabited by Afro-Cubans, African-Americans, and some poor whites. Cubans worked together in the cigar industry and interacted in public spaces, but they lived segregated social and religious lives. Race became stronger than language. At first, language was a barrier between Afro-Cubans and African-Americans. With time, the racial politics in the United States became a force that brought all people of color together. As with many Afro-Hispanics and Afro-Latinos living in different geographic spaces, Grillo found solace in the African-American community.

The Cuban revolution improved the lives of many who had been denied access to schools and hospitals, but race appeared to play a role as blacks continued to occupy the bottom rung of the ladder. This has become more visible as mainly white Cubans receive remittances from relatives living abroad and as Cuba’s economy relies on tourism, rendering blacks invisible to the hard currency market, except for the traditional sex trade. However, Fernando Ortiz’s *Cuban Counterpoint Tobacco and Sugar* (1940) and Lydia Cabrera’s *El monte* (1954), to mention two seminal works, show that some Cuban-American writers have found a voice in the Afro-Cuban culture. Certainly, this has been the position of Cuban-American writers such as Cristina García, who focuses on the African aspect of Cuban culture, in particular Regla de Ocha, to frame her first two novels, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) and *The Agüero Sisters* (1997). As stated above, national culture is not limited to the geographic space of the nation, but Caribbean culture is transnational and is present in the adopted country. In fact, further exploration into the topic shows that the culture of the adopted country is already present in the country of origin, an idea addressed in Juan Flores’s *The Diaspora Strikes Back* (2008) and prevalent with the US occupations of Puerto Rico, but also in its influence in Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

In *Dreaming in Cuban*, the character Pilar returns to the island and learns about her family’s past. However, the structures of Cuban culture that she finds on the island are mirrored in the adopted country: Santería, anti-Castro sentiments, and pro-Castro support, to name the most obvious ones. The journey to visit her grandmother, Celia, recover her letters, and access her family history is also a way of understanding how the past of her family in Cuba intersects with her presence in the United States. And Pilar’s curiosity about Santería in New York points to Felicia’s rituals on the island and Herminia’s narration. In García’s *The Agüero Sisters*, Regla de Ocha is more evident and determines the course of the novel. Reina, who works as an electrician in the region of El Cobre, the city of Cuba’s patron saint, is struck

by lightning and undergoes a transformation in which the skins of others are grafted onto hers. She prays to la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, her spiritual mother, but her father, the deity of lightning, is Changó. The reader is charged with the task of understanding why Ignacio killed his wife, Blanca, conceivably because she returned pregnant with someone else's child, whom she names Reina. The narration opens and closes with Blanca's death, on 8 September 1948, the day of Cuba's patron saint, and Blanca's lover is a black man; the mother represents Oshún and her father Changó.

There are other Cuban writers who rely on African religions for their inspiration; such is the case with Adrián Castro. The title of his *Cantos to Blood and Honey* (1997) invokes the ingredients use to please the Orishas. "In the Beginning" welcomes the arrival of African religions, the "fertility hidden in shells & stones," and all that defines "Crio-o-o-ollo! / Those with one foot chiseled in the islands / the other strutting Yourba, Arara, / Kongo, Carabali – / daughters of Oshun / sons of Hebioso / Ganga Nsasi owning aunts & uncles / brave men of Ekue Abasi" (Castro 1997: 14–15). "The wedding between Spain & Africa" produces Cuba's transculturation, but for Castro the syncretic religion of Santería: Olofin, Saint Barbara, Our Lady of Mercy, San Francisco of Assisi, Our Virgin of Regla, with their corresponding African names. For Castro, Africa is in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, but also in Little Havana and the Lower East Side. His "Bilingual bicultural by U.S.A.," a poem about his own Cuban, Dominican, and North American identities, and the mixture of cultures they represent, already signals a new and different space that Afro-Latinos occupy. In *Wise Fish, Tales in 6/8 Time* (2005), Castro mixes music, language and Afro-Caribbean religious images in which the transcultural spaces of Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic blend with New York City and Miami.

It should be clear by now that while this study underscores an Afro-Latino literature and identity fostered by Afro-Latino writers, it also accentuates a literature written by Latinos. Latino writers such as Esmeralda Santiago, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Cristina García in a broad sense are also Afro-Latinas; they draw on what they perceive to be the strengths of blackness that includes the African component of Caribbean Identity. This is also the case of writers such as Julia Alvarez, whose presence in the United States allowed her to understand the linguistic and racial isolation experienced by Afro-Latinos, at home and in her parents' country of origin. These non-Afro-Latino writers are also treated as if they were black, and they too begin to negotiate a racial identity unimaginable in their country of origin. In her essay "Black Behind the Ears," Alvarez claims an Afro-Dominican identity that is also hers. In *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), Yolanda searches for a childhood past in the Dominican Republic, perhaps before she lost her accent. Under different circumstances, prosperous Dominicans do not see the black maids. However, the author's alter ego's linguistic, cultural, and racial isolation motivated her to consider the racial conditions present in the Dominican Republic but ignored by many inhabitants and writers. At the physical end of the novel, or the chronological beginning of the protagonist's life, she finds and embraces the "invisible" black Dominicans, who also influenced her life. In Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home* (1999), university students call the protagonist "nigger," and target the main

character for her dark skin. This act forces her to seek shelter in her home environment and, ironically, exposes her to the family trauma; she becomes a victim of incest rape in the presumed sanctity of the household.

Afro-Latino images will continue to challenge the national and transnational discourses on identity as more Dominican writers explore the racial tensions they see and experience on the mainland and look for ways of interpreting their parents' culture. One of the more successful writers to do this is Junot Díaz, whose 1996 collection of short stories, *Drown*, became an instant success. His stories are already marked by race, evident in the title "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie." Though gender is an issue, race becomes a concern for dating women, each requiring a particular strategy. However, in his *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Díaz weaves together two geographical spaces and cultural identities where race becomes all too noticeable. Oscar, defined as a dark-skinned Dominican, and mistaken for a Puerto Rican, struggles with his identity. Oscar's mother, Belicia, is a black Dominican, an adjective in the Dominican Republic more aptly reserved for Haitians, and her own daughter, Lola, identifies her as a Haitian. All are descendants of Afro-Dominicans, a terminology Dominicans at home reject, but many Dominican-Americans are more willing to consider given the racial conditions of their city of residence, according to Ginetta Candelario, in the *Black Mosaic of Washington DC*.

Afro-Dominican writers such as Blás Jiménez and Norberto James Rawlings, who at one time or another made the United States their home – Rawlings lives in Boston – draw upon their US experience to underscore race matters many Dominicans refuse to consider, a position also expounded by Alvarez, Pérez, and Díaz. Both Jiménez and Rawlings write in Spanish for a reader in their home country, but also for those in the United States, and challenge the "imagined" national and geographic identity of the Dominican Republic. Their residence in the United States insists they question the homogeneous discourse of the national culture back home. In some respects, their efforts have not fallen on deaf ears, although national writers continue to perpetuate a traditional and Western vision of the national. But, collectively, they have set the groundwork for other interpretations for future writers to draw upon. In Rawlings's early-anthologized poem "Los inmigrantes" (1969), he searches for his Dominican identity in his Anglo-Caribbean ancestors, a community invisible to a configuration of the country's identity. In *La umbral del silencio* (2007), along with poems about exile, solitude, memory, vegetation, among others, he includes "Genealogía," about his genealogical past. In *La patria portátil* (2008), Rawlings insists on his Otherness, as he mixes Spanish and English and refers to his heritage.

Blás Jiménez was the loudest voice to challenge the Dominican establishment's vision of blackness, which he also considered to be an essential component of Dominican identity. In *Caribe africano en despertar* (1984), Jiménez claimed his Africanness in poems such as "Como cimarrón bailando al caer la noche," about the shackled slave denied his liberty; "Tu son Caribe," about the music the speaker carries within; and "Guerrillero," about liberty, blackness, and self-identity.

There are growing numbers of Afro-Hispanic authors writing in the United States and they also add to the expanding concept of black or Afro-Latinos. For example, Carlos Guillermo Wilson, of Panama, has written works such as *Los mosquitos de*

Orixa Changó: Cuentos y poemas (2000) for a Spanish-speaking reader. His *Los nietos de Felicidad Dolores* (1991) narrates the lives of Panamanians of West Indian ancestry working in the Canal Zone and then migrating to the United States. The novel refers to two or more transcultural spaces.

Latino, and Afro-Latino literature in particular, challenges the predominant discourses and positions Afro-Latino identity at the center of race matters in both the country of origin and adopted homeland. A central component to broadening the conversation about Latino literature and identity is continued by *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (2010), edited by Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores. This is the first anthology on the subject to gather important works, some difficult to find, authored by Latinos and Afro-Hispanics. As a collective history, it portrays the lives of their characters from the inception of Africans in the Americas to the present. The content of the book goes beyond literature and includes articles, testimonies, music, religion, cinema, and other popular manifestations of culture in both primary and secondary sources. The compilation of a heterogeneous text helps to address the complexities of the subject matter, but the definitions of Latinos and Afro-Latinos are imprecise, since it seeks to identify these individuals in an era well before the United States, whose culture gave meaning to the term Latino, became a nation. Also, the popular and often misunderstood term “latinidad,” in my opinion, does not convey a Latino identity. In Spanish, the term is more closely associated with Vulgar Latin and the development of the other Romance languages (French, Portuguese, Romanian, Italian, and Catalan are the most popular) than with the Latino population it desires to address that resides in the United States. As I have argued elsewhere, Latino and Hispano (Hispanic) are terms that exist in Spanish and English but their use in English are different from their meanings in Spanish. The divergence of signification occurs when one speaker uses a term in one language, and it is interpreted differently in the other one. However, these imprecisions are also adding to the complexity of Latino and also include Afro-Latino identity.

While the present study discusses Afro-Latino Caribbean literature in countries with sizable populations of African descendants who reside in the United States, there are other ethnic, racial, and cultural groups leaving their mark. Certainly, Mexico, among other countries, counts on an Afro-Mexican population that is gaining increasing attention, even though there are still significant numbers of nationals who refuse to acknowledge their presence. Mexico traces its black citizenry to the slavery period, but African-Americans escaping slavery also made their way to the neighboring country, and some arrived from other countries such as Cuba, as is cited in Carlos Fuentes’s *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962). Octavio Paz refers to the Pachuco in his *Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), whom the Nobel Prize Lauriat considers oddities within the US landscape, just as blacks do not appear to fit into the same backdrop. In this regard, Pachucos, Chicanos, Afro-Latinos, and Afro-Americans can be studied as occupying a similar positionality within US society. Nevertheless, there are instances when Chicano literature recognizes an African ancestry. The best-known text is Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderland/La Frontera* (1987), which discusses the narrator/poetic voice’s multiple identities, which also includes black, mestizo, and African, as she is aided by Yemayá, a major deity in one of Cuba’s African religions. Blackness and Afro-Latino identity helps to negotiate

spaces of different and difference. In so doing, Afro-Latino identity occupies center stage of the postmodern discourse.

Suggested further reading

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