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It is difficult to believe that 15 years after her death in the United States, the Cuban-born ethnographer and fiction writer Lydia Cabrera (1900–1991) has only now become the subject of a critical volume in English. In this recently published study, author Rodríguez-Mangual attempts to establish that Cabrera's corpus was postmodern *avant la lettre* and mounted a forceful challenge to anthropology's pretensions to scientific inquiry while "constitut[ing] an alternative epistemology" for Afro-Cubans (132). However, it soon becomes evident that Rodríguez-Mangual has emptied the adjective "postmodern" of its meaning in relation to modernity, and regards it merely as a synonym for "provocative," "experimental," and "potentially transgressive." Theorists such as Homi Bhabha are summoned and dispatched in rapid succession; one can never tell whether the term "discourse"—deployed *ad nauseam*—is meant to conform to Michel Foucault's definition or simply serve as a synonym for "rhetoric" or even "conversation." The concepts of agency and subjectivity are employed but not distinguished or paid their due—which, considering their ubiquity, should be time and a half. In general, Rodríguez-Mangual's prose heaves under the weight of the obfuscating jargon that has given postmodern scholarship a bad name; after reading a dozen passages similar to, "Through the agglomeration of citations a constitutive moment of a relative heterology is articulated," one's patience begins to wear thin (87). The most successful chapter is the last, "The Anthropologist's Exile," in which Rodríguez-Mangual considers Cabrera's literary production after her

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departure from Cuba in 1960, and draws persuasively on contemporary scholarship concerning exile, displacement, and the notion of the simulacra. Tellingly, perhaps, this is the section in which the least attention is devoted to “the construction of an Afro-Cuban cultural identity.”

The substance of *Lydia Cabrera* is more troubling than its style. The author sets up legendary scholar Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969)—whose *oeuvre* has cast a positively rotund shadow over hers—as an overstuffed straw man. To refute Rodríguez-Mangual’s mischaracterization of Ortiz point by point is to hazard both exceeding the space allotted for this review and appearing to indulge in apologia, but suffice it to say that his scholarship is both far richer and more disturbing than she suggests. Critiques of Ortiz deserve careful consideration, but Rodríguez-Mangual does not engage with more nuanced reevaluations by Katherine Hagedorn, Alejandra Bronfman, Fernando Coronil, and Antonio Benítez-Rojo. Nor does the author consult the eye-opening research on formulations of Afro-Cuban cultural identity—particularly following the “race war” of 1912, entailing the massacre of roughly three thousand Afro-Cubans—conducted by Aline Helg, Alejandro de la Fuente, and Stephan Palmié, among others. In one of her facile jabs at Ortiz, the author condemns his voyeuristic pursuit of the exotic, quoting bell hooks on the “the concrete search for a real primitive paradise, whether that location be a country or a body” (40) and on Western nostalgia as “reenacting and reritualizing in different ways the imperialist, colonizing journey as a narrative fantasy of power and desire, of seduction by the Other” (106). In fact, what these lines recalled for this reviewer were Rodríguez-Mangual’s own assertions that,

“I would never have understood Cabrera without getting to know the culture about which she wrote, without smelling the sweat, and sweating myself, to the rhythm of the drums during a *Toque de tambor* [Afro-Cuban religious ceremony]. And, as someone once wrote, Cuba is addictive . . .” (x). Seldom has the expression “invention is one percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration” been understood so literally.

In arguing that Cabrera strove to “recreat[e] the voice of the Other, thereby claiming a more radical subjectivity for the Afro-Cuban,” Rodríguez-Mangual participates in a rather perverse, if altogether unintentional, endorsement of Ortiz’s most reactionary early stereotypes (135). As if one still were to need evidence that identity politics and the fetishization of “difference” merit interrogation, the qualities supposedly shared by Afro-Cubans are essentialized more along the lines of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. For Afro-Cubans, Rodríguez-Mangual writes, “magic lives in harmony with the real,” and she credits them with a “supernatural perception of their surroundings,” claiming that in Cabrera’s 1954 masterpiece *El Monte. Igbo Finda. Ewe Orisha. Vititi Nfinda*, the text’s “structural disorganization echoes the Afro-Cuban imaginary” in its “chronological and thematic” disorder (154, 111, 88). She goes on to contend, “Cabrera highlights the fact that the Afro-Cuban understanding of metaphysics is inscribed in an alternate world independent of the empirical data of the West... In her stories, in accordance with the Afro-Cuban cosmovision described in Cabrera’s [ethnographies], the unreal is inserted in daily life. Hence people turn into animals” (119). This recitation of “facts” reaches its absurd zenith when the author asserts that Afro-Cuban myths involve incest as “an emergent mode of alterity” that

“def[ies] national allegory,” neglecting to point out that incest numbers among the crimes most harshly punished in these narratives, and occupies a place as central to Cuban nationalist discourse as the great 19th century novel, Cirilo Villaverde’s 1882 *Cecilia Valdés o la Loma del Ángel* (92, 93). Elsewhere, she muses approvingly that Cabrera “promotes an ideology constituted as African that... display[s] exaggerated germination and the symbiosis of sexuality and music” (123). Such generalizations serve as a potent reminder that those unfamiliar with the arguments of *How Natives Think* are doomed to repeat them.

For Rodríguez-Mangual, racial and religious identities are completely conflated, never mind that initiates of European and Asian descent have historically figured among the most visible and vocal proponents of Afro-Cuban religions, whether Abakuá, Lucumí/Santería, or the *reglas de Congo*. This elision is of a piece with her rudimentary understanding of Africanity and blackness as a modality of the modern—not its antithesis—in the Afro-Atlantic world. For instance, it is jarring, if not surprising, for the author to cast Afro-Cuban practices and narratives without African precedents as inauthentic, citing one critic intent on “determin[ing] which [of Cabrera’s] stories are ‘stories of African themes’—which she defines as those that incorporate real myths and legends from Africa—versus the ‘stories of the imagination’—black fairy tales” (117). Rodríguez-Mangual’s assumption that Afro-Cuban myths would associate Africa with “the jungle, the hunter, and the tribe” ignores Cuba’s lush vegetation, valiant *cimarrones*, and highly differentiated ethnic groups (123).¹ Then again, *Lydia Cabrera* teems with visions of deracinated Africans bereft

of cultural patrimony and related notions not seriously entertained since the days of Melville Herskovits: “There is a need to create myths in order for blacks to establish a paradigm of the [sic] Africa that then enables them to recover a lost identity” (127). It is sadly predictable that only the upper class, white ethnographer—Cabrera—is viewed as invested in “recovering” and “reclaiming” Afro-Cubans’ history, on behalf of those now “able to remember the stories of the past thanks to her” (167, 151, 153).

Perhaps in an homage to Cabrera’s widely recognized writings on the water goddesses Yemayá and Ochún, the cover of *Lydia Cabrera* gleams in tropical shades of blue and yellow. Unfortunately, there is no disguising Rodríguez-Mangual’s egregious treatment of Afro-Cuban religions. Although the writings of both Ortiz and Cabrera contain errors characteristic of trailblazing scholarship in a nascent field, considering the range of resources available today, Rodríguez-Mangual has little excuse for them. To rectify only a few concerning Lucumí, popularly called Santería, what the author terms “the Ocha sect” emphatically does not “in particular includ[e] the practice of lesbianism”; it does, nevertheless, accept that some priestesses identify as lesbians (127). She erroneously assumes that Cabrera’s characterization of the deity Inle is both reliable and normative, and on this basis faults other texts for not casting him as the protector of lesbians as well as gays. In practice, no such relation of direct patronage exists, although common sense dictates that the trouser-wearing warrior queen Oyá (depicted in praise-songs as bearded, revolutionary, and fire-breathing) would surpass Inle as a role model for women flouting gender conventions. As if to confound matters further, the text uses

the male pronoun for Oyá and the feminine for the male deity Orula; no appeal to the semiotic instability of signs can change the fact that the author is merely incorrect (86, 112). Contrary to Rodríguez-Mangual, only within communities headed by the male priests called *babalawos* are women categorically excluded from sacrificing four-legged animals, and *babalawos* employ a chain of palm nut kernels, not coconuts, in order to conduct Ifá divination (128). In addition, I am quite certain that any practitioner would be astonished to hear him or herself described—three times!—as divining not through cowry shells, but snails (111, 127, 131).

Rodríguez-Mangual's grasp of Cabrera's influences proves quite tenuous, and tends to slip most frequently when crowning her subject with unearned laurels. To clarify one representative case of misattribution, it is not Cabrera, but the prolific historian of religions Mircea Eliade, who "add[s] to the myth of origin the return to the beginning of history, characterized as a present with the ability to renew itself" most famously in his 1949 *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour: archétypes et répétition* (126). This is not to cast Cabrera as derivative, but rather to demonstrate Rodríguez-Mangual's reluctance to consider her subject in terms of intellectual genealogy, and probe her later turn towards the comparative project (epigraph by Joseph Campbell notwithstanding). Similarly, with reference to her apparent dearth of precursors, Rodríguez-Mangual vastly overstates Cabrera's—and her informants'—reliance solely on oral tradition, ignoring the written literature on Afro-Cuban religions produced by practitioners and long in circulation at the time of *El Monte*'s composition (Dianteuill and Swearingen 2003).

Indeed, one plausible precedent for *El Monte* is a volume that Cabrera quite possibly ran across in her father's library, or purchased for her own: Rafael Roche Monteagudo's 1908 *La policía y sus misterios en Cuba*. A valentine to the patriotism, valor, and scientific methodology of law enforcement officers, *La policía* invited readers to peer over the shoulder of a seasoned cop—actually Havana's chief of police—and pore over ethnographic texts produced in the course of criminal investigations. As if to caution against confusing a theoretical position or political agenda with a set of aesthetic decisions, there are several uncanny similarities between the frequently reprinted *La policía* and *El Monte*: in both one finds the "Tradition of the Symbolic Palm"; the reproduction of prayers; photographs of informants, composite altars, and ritual objects in isolation; multiple spellings of saints' names and religious terms in different liturgical languages; and interminable lists, with an emphasis on translation. Had Rodríguez-Mangual evinced an awareness of this text, it might have been fruitful to discuss *El Monte* as Cabrera's oppositional, even subversive, deconstruction of it. As it stands, Roche Monteagudo joins Eliade as yet another untapped resource.

At this point, the reader is entitled to wonder aloud how, precisely, she will be rewarded for searching out Cabrera's oeuvre, beginning with *El Monte*. Rodríguez-Mangual would never admit it, but in *El Monte* Cabrera occasionally treats her informants as suspects to be cross-examined—as Marcel Griaule often does in his essays and *Conversations with Ogotemméli*. She tends to objectify her interlocutors as "living documents" to be read and discarded, repositories of lore and ethnopharmacological information that may be falsified

and dismissed (1954:2). However, also anticipating Griaule, her incredulity yields to a more ambivalent response. She becomes impressed by the complexity of Afro-Cuban cosmologies and creole innovations, developing an appreciation for her informants inspired equally by their generosity and acumen. Although broached nowhere in *Lydia Cabrera*, the subject of ventriloquism recurs repeatedly in *El Monte*—for instance, in the case of spirit possession and the friction-drum speech of Abakuá—and in passages concerning ventriloquists’ virtuosity, we may glimpse Cabrera meditating on her own ethnographic voice, as well as on the phenomenon of speaking for, or through, another (not necessarily an “Other”). The most arresting moments are those in which Cabrera abandons the binary oppositions that she has arduously constructed (rationality/superstition, science/magic, doctor/witch), to see beyond the dichotomies of *negro* and *blanco* (1954:11). In a phrase not noted by Rodríguez-Manguel, Cabrera alludes to “blancos de color”—“whites of color,” or “black whites”—and one wonders whether the secret to Cabrera’s approach languishes unexamined in such wordplay (1954:24).

Readers of both her ethnography and fiction can expect to be startled by Cabrera’s audacious mobilization of figurative language, best analyzed as emblematic of the high modernist tradition—imagine a cross between Gertrude Stein and Michel Leiris that is more than the sum of its parts. Last but not least, there is Cabrera’s satire, with its telescopic yet blanchingly acute scrutiny of human behavior, sharpened throughout a career at the margins: white among Afro-Cubans informants; an elite with the underclass; female in the midst of male scholars; lesbian in a het-

eronormative world; and, during her Miami years, an expatriate 90 miles and a lifetime away from her country of birth. It is to be lamented that, even in a study that bears her name, Cabrera should remain largely on the outside.

Note

¹Moreover, as Jorge Luis Borges once observed, Argentine fiction need not contain Argentine landscapes, topography, botany, zoology—or be populated with gauchos—to capture Argentine conditions (2000:422).

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