

Literary Approaches to Two Centuries of Black Cuban Thought: The Novel

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The serious development Cuban narratives saw in the third decade of the nineteenth century (1830-1840) markedly revealed a certain interest in blacks on the island. Even if they hadn't yet defined concepts such as motherland, identity and others that contributed to the symbolic creation of a multifaceted and multicultural nation, writers had already begun to sketch out all the social strata and conflicts that would embody a future Cuba.

Thus, as Mexican writer Alfonso Reyes has asserted, "literature is not a decorative activity, but rather man's most complete form of expression."¹ José Martí, too, affirmed that "each social class brings with it its own form of expression to literature, such that throughout its different phases it could recount the history of people with more truth than its important chronicles and decades."² This is a reflection of what his writing contributed to helping shape Cuban nationality. With both these ideas in mind, narrative began its long journey towards describing the island's real panorama. Beyond any use of

fiction or testimony, it gave shape to Cuban realities, depicting different types of people and bringing together customs that characterized real Cubans.

This was a period of denunciations mixed in with different styles and genres, resulting in literary pieces of better or worse quality. Yet, the topics they included spread like wildfire, with their treatment of the race problem, and specificities about the inhuman conditions in which blacks lived. Measures and voices against slavery emerged from a combination of many factors—as many external as internal. These first literary works attempted to unite people's thoughts about the issue, and had sufficient impact to attract attention, awaken sensibilities, and raise consciousness about the race issue in Cuba.

This brief look at the most relevantly significant texts in Cuba, because they denounced the scourge of slavery, is meant to commemorate those who were pioneers in the fight against racial discrimination, which still needs voices to condemn it after two whole centuries.

The anti-slavery novel in the nineteenth century

El ingenio o las delicias del campo [The Sugarmill or the Delights of the Countryside]

Even though the first anti-slavery novel, *Francisco*, by Anselmo Suárez y Romero, is written in the 1830s (1838) it is not published as a book till near the end of that century, and not in Cuba, but in New York, in 1880, where it is ironically titled *El ingenio o las delicias del campo* [The Sugarmill or the Delights of the Countryside]. This novel was a forceful denunciation of the mistreatment and misery of slaves.³

It is a sentimental drama involving slaves Francisco and Dorothea, who are not allowed to marry because of their owner, Doña Dolores Mendizábal, and her son, Ricardo. This storyline served a pretext to liberally depict—not without sordidness—life at a sugarmill, and customs, as well as African rites and songs. Yet, despite the fact the author turned the manuscript over to Englishman Richard R. Madden, in 1838, who published an anti-slavery album in London, the manuscript was apparently lost, and Suárez y Romero had to rewrite it. Once in New York, the author wrote its prologue and published it in 1880.

Between the time of *Francisco*'s disappearance and its subsequent publication, Antonio Zambrana delivered to a printing house in Chile a similar work, *El negro Francisco* [The black Francisco] (1875), another novel that followed this anti-slavery trend. Yet another writer who left his literary mark during that time was Martín Morúa Delgado, a renowned journalist and patriot who attempted to be, as José Antonio Portuondo, “the black Zola.” Despite his failure to accomplish this, he did write a number of works under the general title *Cosas de mi tierra* [Things of my Land], and gave to Cuba's literary legacy the novels *Sofía* (1891)

and *La familia Inzuázu* [The Inzuazu Family] (1901), both with anti-slavery overtones.

The tragedy of slavery and racial discrimination that is depicted in *Sofía* is seen through the testimony of a young mulatto who feels the entire weight on his shoulders of a white class that disdains him due to his skin color. *La familia Inzuázu* is a saga in which some of the other novel's characters reappear, and which contains similar subjects presented with melodramatic tone. According to scholar Salvador Bueno, though, this does not diminish the value of the interesting social scene described in the novel.

Seen as the writer who introduced naturalism to Cuban literature, “Morúa Delgado, as a novelist, had unquestionable ability, but his motives were quite beyond his actual talent as a writer.”⁴ Scholar Max Henríquez Ureña, who agrees with Bueno, briefly summarizes the author and his two works: “Morúa's imagery is strong. It is alive and animated, despite the fact there are many passages that lack surer execution.”⁵ “This can be explained thus,” wrote Henríquez Ureña, “because these are thesis novels, and the author is more concerned with the problems he was setting forth in them, and less so with their aesthetics.”⁶

Francisco Calcagno is another important figure for Cuban literature from that period. He forayed into the anti-slavery novel, but did not make much a literary mark with it, at least according to critics who work on the race topic in Cuba narratives. Despite being described as hard working and prolific, Calcagno “published a few novels of limited literary merit, among them *Romualdo y otros tantos* [Romualdo and So Many Others], with its anti-slavery bent.”⁷ Yet, his greatest contribution was to be publicly persistent in his literary attempts against racial discrimination.

The black novel of the twentieth century *La raza triste* [The Sad Race]

The end of slavery (1886) and Cuba's independence from Spanish colonialism (1898) did not usher in a cessation of the marginalization of blacks in the Republic. Segregationism, discrimination, and other outrageous problems affecting black people were utterly common at the beginning of Cuba's twentieth century.

The iron shackles that symbolized slavery morphed into the shackles of marginalization—due to skin color. The Republic that was supposed to be “with all, and for the good of all,” as Martí had dreamt, was only a myth. The conflicts and prejudices inherited from the previous century were well ensconced in twentieth-century Cuba, which gave another, less humiliating, but no less hurtful and damaging hue to the discrimination aimed against people on account of their skin color.

The literary scene during the first half of the twentieth century was characterized by what Jorge Mañach early on denominated “a lack of a national consciousness to support and inspire literary creators.”⁸ Enrique José Varona maintained that in a society that naturally rejected any religious or moral codification of its civic life, modernity ended up being an exercise in simulation. Thus, Varona believed that “old laws and privileges didn't die; they just pretended to. Freedom was pie in the sky; there was no equality to be found under the banner of land and brotherhood.”⁹

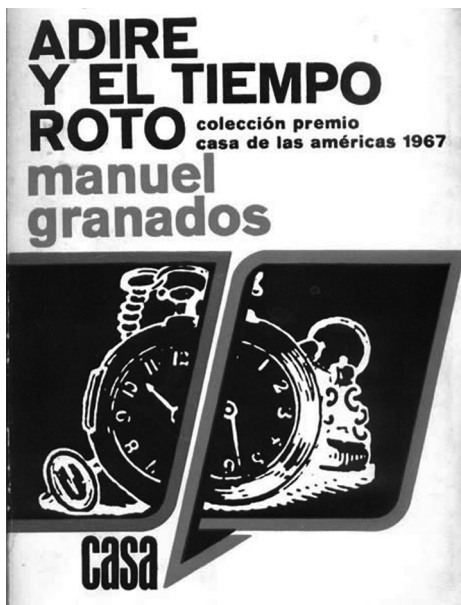
Nonetheless, the ethical debt that was owed to the least fortunate and, particularly to those who suffered so much because of skin color, caused some Cuban writers to take on the challenge of digging deep into racial discrimination. Those points at which evoking history and a tendency to write about blacks intersected “revealed certain texts whose plots dealt with the past and in which, nevertheless, there is an obvious desire to describe the problems of black

people as intimately tied to the long term effects and legacy of slavery. The same can be said for their attempts to reconstruct, for example, their participation in the independence struggles.”¹⁰ This is how scholar Alberto Garrandés summarizes and maps the narrative context of a style that incorporated a commitment to highlighting black contributions to Cuban culture, and the integration of the Cuban nationality. Such subjects, as they were presented in these early, twentieth-century, ‘black’ novels, “would become extremely important to both writing about social oppression and the graphic representation of the exotic during the *avant garde*.”¹¹

Among the ‘black’ novels written during the Republican period, there are four with varying degrees of literariness and transcendence that stand out because they managed to scrutinize the unstable and tragic situation of blacks in the nation's history. The best, according to Garrandés, were *La raza triste* [The Sad Race] (1924), by Jesús Masdeu; *¡Ecué-Yamba-O!* [Praised be the Creators] (1933), by Alejo Carpentier; *Sombras del pueblo negro* [Shadows of Black People] (1940), by Irma Pedroso; and, *Tam-tam* (1941), by Federico de Ibarzábal.

Despite the fact they all dealt with racial discrimination, their chronological contexts were different. Different, too, was the development of their plotlines and protagonists, and the distinctive edge they gave to the subject of blacks during the colonial period and Republican era.

While *La raza triste* narrates the hate and disdain a mulatto garners when he breaks with social convention and attempts an interracial relationship with a white woman, *¡Ecué-Yamba-O!* does much more to tell of the cyclic vicissitudes an oppressed person had to endure than to ‘paint’ a great, Cubist painting of black life on a sugar plantation. Utopian ideals also entered the creative mix, and Irma Pedroso was



ahead of her time with her book *Sombras del pueblo negro*. In it, she recounts the story of the failure suffered by a mulatto woman who is elected town councilor in a Cuban town in Oriente province. Rather than diminish its impact, the unlikelihood of this context highlights the narrative assertion—a fully grown, mature woman is situated in a natural social and human environment so she can assert her identity.

More over, the novel is exemplary in its novelistically balanced presentation of important issues: women's bodies as sites of pleasure, the segregation of black subjects, socio-economic conditions, and the domestic lives of a minority. They all add up to a sort of typology of the race problem in Cuba.¹²

Yet, because at least one work had to deal with race issues in a historical context, Federico de Ibarzábal, with *Tam-tam*, delves into the role played by blacks in the wars of the nineteenth century with writing that does so in a way that possesses socio-cultural overtones.

In reality, if four novels are not enough to amply reveal the race problem from the colonial period to now, they certainly make up a

large literary fresco on which are visualized the most difficult issues generated by perceptions of different skin colors, from a position that favors equality. Even though other works were not held to be the best ever written about the race problem, they certainly contributed significantly to the unraveling and denunciation of the marginalization of blacks. Among these are *Belén el ashanti* [Belén the Ashanti] (1924), by Jorge Mañach; *Virgen del solar* [Tenement House Virgin] (1934), by Serapio Paz Zamora; and, *El negro que se bebió la luna* [The Black Man Who Drank the Moon] (1940), by Luis Felipe Rodríguez. These do not only serve to complement the other, better known ones; they also foreshadow, in many cases, the times and prejudices that blacks would have to endure during the Republican period, up till the Revolution, in 1959, because of their tone and subjects.

The subject of Black Cubans in the twenty-first century

Revolution and racism

Adire y el tiempo roto [Adire and the Broken Time]

Discrimination against blacks was not brought to an end by the revolution of 1959. If in theory differences on account of skin color were abolished by decree, the reality was another. Convinced or obliged to acknowledge publicly that they owed their physical and intellectual freedom to the revolutionary process, many black Cubans believed they had achieved the space they had sought for more than a century and a half of struggle against discrimination. Yet, this was not the case. Far from the stockade of the colonial era, they found themselves caught in the trap of obligation and gratitude, both attitudes necessary if there were to be dubbed 'faithful'—the only legitimate emancipation instrument that would definitively free them from their social disadvantage. This combined sentiment of culpability or debt with their liberators sometimes caused them to of-

fer support to the revolution. Other times, it led them to maintain an ominous silence, so as not to be seen as ‘dogs that bit the hand that fed them.’ More recently, and in general terms, they have had to accept that their contemporary marginalization differs from that of other times only in the way it is achieved.

Black Cubans kept on being the ones with the fewest options for survival, those who were distanced from power, and those whose number was most represented in Cuba’s pockets of marginality—despite the fact they demonstrated their loyalty to the revolution. Notwithstanding, the protagonists and plots of today’s Cuban novels about the race problem never have a direct focus on the demands of blacks of those in power, or defend their racial characteristics. It would seem that as black people they want nothing. Their ethnic differences blend with those of the rest of society’s, and open and demonstrable racial discrimination is ascribed to social prejudice only—even in obviously racial situations.

Manolo Granados’s novel *Adire y el tiempo roto* [Adire and the Broken Time] (1967) corroborates the aforementioned assertion via the regency of its protagonist, Julian’s, black body, “a problem of racial identity, personal identity and cultural identity.”¹⁴ In Julian’s struggle with personal demons, *Adire* “constitutes the long and troubled road of a black man in search of his destiny, his balance amongst the rest. Yet, because he does not have to defend his skin color, because difference due to skin color no longer exists—at least on paper—Julián finds himself forced to seek the only path that if he follows it his fragmented personality can come together: the revolution. Finding it impossible to define which part of his identity to assume in a context plagued by symbols of false equality, his search leads him to a state of confusion, which makes him go against his personal ethics.

Once he is an authentic revolutionary, upon executing a sinister assassin paid by the *Servicio de Inteligencia Militar* [Military Intelligence Service] (SIM), of the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship, Julián starts his journey towards what will integrate him into the revolution. This was one of the few ways to escape marginalization at the time. From then on, “his life was divided in two. In one of them, he was an object adrift, reading books that others see as simple mysteries of time lost, and allowing himself to be eroticized by the glances of Elsa, a young, white woman who dreams about his skin and member, which entices him.”¹⁵ In the other, his is an existence constructed upon a goal—becoming a good revolutionary serving a clandestine struggle, and going up the Sierra Maestra to join one of two guerrilla fronts.”¹⁶

Beyond his desire to be considered a trustworthy black, as a protagonist in a society that feigned egalitarianism, Julián does not change his way of thinking. The accumulated inferiority complex of so many blacks after centuries of marginalization cause him to struggle with the idea of accepting his skin color, or not accepting it, and ‘improving the race.’ His essential dilemma adds to his already diminished sense of things. In an act of hurtful mediocrity, Julián rejects the nurturing values of his racial identity and with frustration expresses: “I don’t like black women; I’ve never liked them. They are barbarous, like our ancestors, and also don’t match what I consider to be beautiful. I am not barbarous. . . I am an Ethiopian body with an Aryan mentality. I can’t stand this sensual country. It’s too damned hot, backward, vulgar and plebian, hybrid, and has a history created by *criollos* lacking lineage, peons, and freed blacks.”¹⁷

With these credentials, which constitute racial self-hatred, Julián starts towards an action that causes him to die in the Escambray mountains, quite physically and mentally dis-

tant from the equality he so dreamt about and yearned for. It did him no good to support the revolution.

La soledad del tiempo [The Loneliness of Time]

Another formula one finds in the focus on blacks in contemporary Cuban literature is the assumption that racism is an individual problem that requires individual solutions. The goal is not to totally avoid reality, but rather show, in less confrontational tones, that there is still discrimination, despite the supposed advances made in racial integration, and show it in protagonists for whom the national landscape is the stuff of reality and fiction. There are no groups, demands, or complaints. Subtlety and valor is what there is, so as not to be humiliated, and to find through personal effort a way to eliminate differences, like crafty, contemporary cimarrons (runaway slaves) who learn to evade certain of life's "traps."

In order to survive, this is the way and creed of Sergio Navarro, a black man who thinks he's an intellectual. "A black man has been three times better to be considered good" is the advice his mother gives the journeyman writer, and this is the criterion applied to the author-protagonist throughout *La soledad del tiempo* [The Loneliness of Time] (2009), a mature and reflexive novel by Alberto Guerra Naranjo.¹⁸ Its images are taken from Cuba's mirrored past, through all its history, as if by a tropical Stendhal. Because of his skin color,

The life of Sergio Navarro was marked by difficulties and contortions, all the way from childhood, when he discovers his "inferiority," to when he becomes a tolerated man—but not because he assumes his racial identity.

His first encounter with his social disadvantage happened the moment Juanelo shouted to him: "You are black, and there are no blacks in the west. Billy the Kid is not black?"¹⁹ Sergio knew not what to do. What he heard abruptly



killed his dream, his aspirations for everything, just like anybody else's. This became a strategic wound he would do anything and everything to hide, but not give into, no matter how his color was undervalued. "It took a good shout from Juanelo to help me understand how different the terrain I was walking on was. He never knew it, and immediately forgot about it. I did not. Everyone holds inside him a primal scream. That was mine. Cruel as it was, it was true. I was black and there were no blacks in the west. Despite what my mother said, there were no blacks. His destiny was written, historic, palpable, and it would be the job of some neighborhood white guy to remind me if I forgot," thinks Sergio as he pedals his bicycle through a dream.²⁰ If it is not a dream of acceptance, at least it's about a national literary prize. This x-ray of an internal feeling—one that is multiplied in a social environment in which blacks always have to lose—permeates the novel, with its revelatory tone. In it, one sees inequalities, even if its expository goal is not just to display race-based discrimination.

Alberto Guerra Naranjo is black like his alter ego Sergio Navarro; the relationship between ethics and writing is a subliminal person who interweaves stories of failures and successes, of searches and misencounters on the uncertain road to racial equality. There is a good reason for Alberto Guerra Navarro—that combination of author and protagonist—to express the following as an antidote against himself or anyone who from childhood on has been discriminated against because of his skin color: “Blacks, all blacks, absolutely all blacks, were for him, and for others who thought like him, simple hunters of humid clothing from clotheslines, people who perspired, ate, shouted, drank and screwed too much—nothing more—despite that fact schools explained differently, and speeches said differently.”²¹

This idea, coming through the voice of a fictional character, jumps off the novel’s pages, travels the streets, gets on the bus, says mass, stamps a Central Committee document, builds a bridge, dances in a theater, writes that there is no discrimination in Cuba, and forms a gigantic choir that sings notes of prejudice and marginality.

These and other works tell and disclose intimacies not taken up by the unofficial rhetoric that has been imposed on the nation. The subject of the social disadvantage of blacks is welcome in Cuban literature today. It was about time. We needed that. Differences due to skin color still exist, as other novels show, too—*Deja dormir a la bestia* [Let the Beast Sleep] (2010), by David Mitrani, and *El mendigo bajo el ciprés* [The Beggar Under the Cypress] (2004), by Guillermo Vidal Ortiz.

Notes:

- 1- Bueno, Salvador. *Historia de la Literatura Cubana*. La Habana: Ministerio de Educación, 1954: 1.
- 2- *Ibid.*
- 3- *Ibid.*, 180.
- 4- *Ibid.*, 242.
- 5- Ureña Henríquez, Max. *Panorama Histórico de la Literatura Cubana*. La Habana: Félix Varela, 2006: 205.
- 6- *Ibid.*
- 7- *Ibid.*, 207.
- 8- Serrano, Pio E.. *Centenario de la República de Cuba*. Madrid: Hispano Cubana, 2003: 199.
- 9- Rojas, Rafael. *Motivos de Anteo*. Madrid: Colibrí, 2008: 216.
- 10- Garrandés, Alberto. *Presunciones*. La Habana: Letras Cubanas, 2005: 30.
- 11- *Ibid.*, 31.
- 12- *Ibid.*, 32.
- 13- Garrandés, Alberto. *El concierto de las fábulas*. La Habana: Letras Cubanas, 2008: 208.
- 14- *Ibid.*
- 15- *Ibid.*, 209.
- 16- *Ibid.*
- 17- *Ibid.*, 210.
- 18- Naranjo Guerra, Alberto. *La soledad del tiempo*. La Habana: Unión, 2009: 147.
- 19- *Ibid.*
- 20- *Ibid.*, 146.