Contributions in Black Studies
A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies

Volume 12 *Ethnicity, Gender, Culture, & Cuba (Special Section)* Article 11

1994

Review / Contemporary Cuban Writings

Jualynne E. Dodson
University of Colorado at Boulder

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs

Recommended Citation
Dodson, Jualynne E. (1994) "Review / Contemporary Cuban Writings," *Contributions in Black Studies*: Vol. 12 , Article 11.
Available at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol12/iss1/11

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Afro-American Studies at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contributions in Black Studies by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Jualynne E. Dodson

REVIEW/CONTEMPORARY CUBAN WRITINGS

AfroCuba: An Anthology of Cuban Writing on Race, Politics and Culture, edited by Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs (Melbourne, Australia: Ocean Press, 1993)

Ocean Press has added a significant resource for those interested in issues of race and politics in the nation of Cuba. By publishing *AFROCUBA: An Anthology of Cuban Writing on Race, Politics and Culture,* Ocean has given academics as well as the general reading audience an additional lens with which to understand race relations and how Cubans themselves view the topic. I only wish this book had been available at the time Carlos Moore's work was published by the University of California Press in 1988. Moore's *Castro, The Blacks, and Africa* was one of the first book-length offerings in English to consider Cuban race relations. Unfortunately, however, the book was devoid of a context or alternative perspective which other published literature was able to offer. Moreover, not only did the work raise a multitude of questions concerning Moore's research and sources, it also read like a highly personal foray into important and serious issues of race and politics. For those reasons I judged it to be an inadequate examination of the topic.

The publication of *AFROCUBA,* a two hundred and eighty-four page anthology edited by Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, now offers additional literature written by Black Cubans focusing on issues of race and politics. However, the sad reality is that, given the current deterioration of economic conditions on the island, we may not have an opportunity to see how Cuba would continue to address the complex issues of racism and of equitable participation by dark- and light-skinned citizens.

Both the Moore volume and this edited anthology focus on the question of Afro-Cubans and their status within revolutionary transitions of the country. An important distinction between the two is that *AFROCUBA* is concerned with presenting excerpts from Cubans, most of whom are dark-skinned, who have written about Blacks and the issue of race in their country. Divided into three parts, the book consists of a collection of literary contributions as well as articles from social science research, only a few of which have been translated into English and seen by the U.S. scholarly community; most will be unknown to the general public. The book should give both audiences their most holistic introduction to Cuban writings on race both prior to and since the revolution.

CONTRIBUTIONS IN BLACK STUDIES, 12 (1994), 104-106

The mixing of excerpts from poems, plays, and prose does not distract from the book's focus nor from understandings the reader will achieve. Materials in the first part consider issues of race and the Cuban black population within a historical context. Readers seeking historical parallels between the experiences of Afro-Cubans and African Americans of the United States will not be disappointed. There is even an inclusion — an excerpt from Pedro Serviat's "Solutions To The Black Problem" — for those who wish to know how the political ideology of revolutionary Cuba *intended* to address the question of racial discrimination and racism.

Part two contains excerpts from literary works, thirteen in all, including poems, plays, and other prose. I think the most important contribution of this section is that it considers religion, specifically the place of African-derived religion within the life and consciousness of Cubans black and white. Most of these materials address a specific aspect of a specific African-derived tradition, i.e.: "An Initiation Ceremony in Regla de Palo" by Gladys Gonzalez Bueno, "Abakua Signs" by Argeliers Leon, or "Ofumelli" by Excilia Saldana. The majority of the Cuban population — perhaps 80% — participate in some facet of one African tradition or another. On the other hand, Christian institutions, whether Protestant or Catholic, can claim but ten to fifteen percent of the population as active members. Books which examine religion in Cuba have tended to feature the role of Christianity, specifically that of the Catholic Church. *AFROCUBA* does not make this mistake and it is a refreshing correction.

Part three, entitled "Redrawing the line," contains excerpts from novels, including Sarduy's forthcoming work, *The Maids.* The focus on race and color here is from the perspective of dark-skinned Cubans. Several pieces also engage an additional theme of Cuban women's reality. The important question of identity and place for black and mulatto women is addressed through literary sources, with no inclusion of research-based or social science writing; this is a weakness of the work.

There is little doubt that *AFROCUBA* is a book grounded in Cuban revolutionary ideals. The editors, and authors they have selected, expect a "new race and a new culture" to be born in Cuba, a new people born through what Fernando Ortiz called "transculturation." The idea and ideal of this concept is re-stated by Nancy Morejón as a "hieroglyphic of races and cultures." Her contribution to the volume examines two poems by Nicolás Guillén.

One is not certain when this new Cuban creation will become operational, but current world economic conditions do not give excessive hope. Current constraints on Cuba's economy, and the government's adjustments to them, are accompanied by patterns of racism inherent in capitalistic market economy. For example, I have personally seen, and been subjected to, the rapid and overt resurgence of color-based discrimination brought about by Cuba's aggressive entry into the tourist industry. The danger is that such racist patterns might be rationalized and justified by the logic of "economic expediency." Worst still, this economic justification might once again link up with existing Christian theological underpinnings relegating dark-skinned people to the realm of inherent inferiority. Such theological segments cannot be reconciled with the revolutionary ideal of a new moral people. Whether or not overt institutional and

personal racism returns to Cuba, and whether or not we see Cuba produce a new race and a new culture, *AFROCUBA* will be a wonderful testimony to the complexities of "race, politics and culture" in a country attempting to confront the issues with very little help or support from outside. Thank you Pedro and Jean!