

## Introduction

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# A FOLKLORE FOR THE FUTURE

### Race and National Narrative in Cuba

*Somos, aunque no quieren saber que somos.  
Somos el músculo;  
somos la esencia del eco alegre;  
somos un signo tabúizante para las lacras de nuestro rol;  
la sombra nos dio pieles con qué abrigar el miedo  
y es una piel de sustos saber nuestro color.*

*[We are, although they don't want to know that we are.  
We are the muscle;  
we are the essence of the joyful echo;  
we are a taboo sign for our blighted role;  
the shadow gave us skins to cover our fear  
and it is a skin of shocks to know our color.]*

In these lines from a 1935 poem entitled “Canción negra sin color” (Black Song without Color), Afro-Cuban poet Marcelino Arozarena captures the paradoxical treatment of black Cubans in Cuba (and Cuban literature) of the time.<sup>1</sup> Black Cubans are present within the national space, he asserts, in both a physical sense—“the muscle”—and as a kind of spiritual presence. This multifaceted existence, however, is met with a lack of acknowledgment—“they don’t want to know that *we are*”—as well as by fear and resistance (a “skin of shocks”). These contradictory reactions are what produce a “black song without color,” in which blackness is present but unrecognized. Arozarena’s description exposes the ambivalent and contradictory function of blackness in the transnational racial politics of the time. While Afro-Cuban culture was in a position to contribute significantly to the idea of Cubanness being constructed by the island’s intellectuals, it was also a problematic, stigmatized element.<sup>2</sup>

One year later, in 1936, the literary critic Gilberto González y Contreras published a short article entitled “La poesía negra” (Black Poetry) that presented a very different—and more positive—view of the significance

of Afro-Cuban culture. González y Contreras focuses his analysis on what he calls “black Cuban poetry,” the relatively large body of literature that had been published in Cuba in the preceding decade (the 1920s) portraying black Cubans, much of it by writers who, unlike Arozarena, were not themselves Afro-Cuban.<sup>3</sup> The “black Cuban poetry” to which his essay refers was part of an artistic movement known as *Afrocubanismo* (Afro-Cubanism), generally understood as a “revalorization of Afro-Cuban culture” in vogue in Cuban literature, music, and visual arts in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Literary *Afrocubanismo* is most often tied to the poetry of writers such as Ramón Guirao, Emilio Ballagas, and Nicolás Guillén, although it has also been connected to novels such as Alejo Carpentier’s *Écue-Yamba-Ó*. González y Contreras argues that this body of work, viewed by many at the time as a literary fad, is in fact a project with profound implications, for the authors of “black Cuban poetry” are involved in an endeavor more complex than mere poetic creation:

La esteva del entólogo remueve la petrificada arcilla, clasificando los materiales, que luego anima el poeta, dotándolos de agilidad, renovándolos. Pero cuando el folklore no deviene del pasado, cuando no se trata de la resurrección de una verdad poética, sino de algo que flota en el presente, de una sustancia prendida a las raíces de la vida popular, la misión del poeta es la de un etnólogo artista. (40)

[The ethnographer’s plow blade stirs up the petrified clay, classifying the materials, which the poet then animates, endowing them with agility, renewing them. But when folklore doesn’t come from the past, when one is not dealing with the resurrection of a poetic truth but with something floating in the present, a substance attached to the roots of popular life, the poet’s mission is that of an artist-ethnographer.]

Through this unusual figure of the artist-ethnographer, González y Contreras characterizes this new literary production as both art and social science: it involves the recognition and understanding of something already present (if unrecognized) as well as the creative adaptation of that “substance,” the coming together of these elements of material culture in a new aesthetic form.

At the time that “La poesía negra” appeared, the term “folklore,” particularly in a European context, was often used to refer to elements of a collective past, whether ethnic, regional, or national.<sup>5</sup> González y Contreras, on the other hand, points to the way in which black Cuban culture is not a folk culture rooted in the past but rather a new kind of “poetic truth” operating in the present. Instead of “animating” a substance from a distant historical moment (suggested in his description by the plow blade, more resonant of archaeology than ethnography), he posits that this new poetic process of expressing “the roots of popular life” involves shifting between registers, as elements of “popular culture” are absorbed and then transformed into what came to be termed “high” culture, implicitly understood as literature and the fine arts. González y Contreras does not explicitly connect the artistic and intellectual project he describes to ideas of nationhood; yet his use of the term “folklore,” coupled with the importance he gives to this new method of creation—the idea of a poetic “mission”—implies that the kind of textual production and the images of black Cubans it presents are more closely related to a concept of national culture than might first appear.

Arozarena and González y Contreras approach the representation of blackness in Cuban letters from opposing positions. As an Afro-Cuban, Arozarena is concerned that black Cubans be fully acknowledged and accepted within the national space. (He also implicitly desires greater possibility for Afro-Cuban self-representation.) “We are,” his poem declares: know us, recognize us. His poem’s paradoxical title makes visible this “absent presence” and implicitly critiques those who would condone this marginalization.<sup>6</sup> González y Contreras, on the other hand, is interested in understanding the creative potential of Afro-Cuban culture as a material substrate of Cuban culture. The artistic process of the writers he identifies as artist-ethnographers involves navigating a “living” folklore, studying and adapting it. While González y Contreras does not explain the extent to which the articulation of this “poetic truth” needs to be faithful to its subject, nor just how this creative-scientific process should work, his essay nonetheless identifies a significant strain of interdisciplinary experimentation that informs Cuban literary and artistic production of the time.

What is the significance of the cultural production around black popular culture that González y Contreras describes? What does it really mean

to transport and transform these racialized elements of “popular life” into texts that form part of what Angel Rama has termed the “republic of letters”—both the production and the discursive and intellectual space of the literary (and political) elite?<sup>7</sup> And what ways of writing are necessary to effect this transformation? This book looks at how writers in Cuba attempted to answer these questions in the country’s first half-century of its existence as an independent nation. Following the lines of investigation suggested by González y Contreras’s provocative observations, it argues that writers in Cuba in the first half of the twentieth century forged a unique literary space in which to imagine the nation precisely through diverse creative experiments that borrow elements from both ethnographic and literary discourses. To explore the potential of this encounter between established literary forms, developing ethnographic methodologies, and popular culture and to show how the texts it produced were employed to create and buttress a particular idea of Cuba as a nation, it analyzes the work of four such “artist-ethnographers”: Fernando Ortiz (1881–1969), seen as the founding father of Cuban anthropology; the novelist Alejo Carpentier (1904–1980); the Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén (1902–1989); and Lydia Cabrera (1898–1991), a self-taught ethnographer and short-story writer whose work epitomizes the discursive impulses of this moment. Their textual experimentation was necessary to negotiate what—for elite intellectuals and political leaders—were potentially problematic elements of what could viably be posited as Cuba’s national identity, in particular race.

As a Caribbean island that only gained full independence in 1901, Cuba was not the only nation in the region to struggle with the question of how to interpret, represent, or incorporate a (majority) nonwhite population. Yet the particular circumstances of Cuba’s history make it a fascinating case study for examining how the relationship of blackness to nation has been constructed in a postcolonial context. For Cuba, blackness was both the problem and the solution: just as the Afro-Cuban presence was part of what made Cuba unique, in a world in which progress and modernity were associated with the Western (European) idea of the nation, the presence of black Cubans threatened to relegate Cuba to the status of non-modern. Through their creative use of literary techniques and ethnographic viewpoints, these artist-ethnographers attempted to navigate this crucial balance.