Lydia Cabrera and the Construction of an Afro-Cuban Identity (review)

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sented race-mixing within a framework of social control. The paintings reflect not simple racial realities, but "the construction of the racial culture of the time" (p. 61).

Although this is the most extensive academic presentation of casta paintings to date, it hardly exhausts the phenomenon as a source of study. As Katzew notes, this is "a genre with many meanings" (p. 201). Her book will be of interest to a wide range of scholars and students, and should do much to stimulate ongoing interest and analysis of these fascinating images.

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Lydia Cabrera and the Construction of an Afro-Cuban Identity. By Edna M. Rodríguez-Mangual. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. Pp. xii, 199. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $59.95 cloth; $24.95 paper.

It is certainly true that contemporary Cuba has exerted an influence disproportionate to its size, politically, demographically and culturally. This timely and illuminating study of the writings of Lydia Cabrera brings to the fore one of its larger-than-life writers, merging insights from ethnology and literary theory to claim a more elevated position than previously allotted to Cabrera.

Rodríguez-Mangual lucidly analyzes the originality of Cabrera, a white Creole woman born in 1900 when Cuba itself was emancipated from the crumbling Spanish empire to become a newborn republic. Cabrera's first book, *Cuentos negros* de Cuba, burst upon the Cuban scene in the original Spanish only in 1940, having first been published in French in 1936. But the stories, presented as fiction, had been gleaned from Cabrera's investigations of religious culture among Afro-Cubans. As a woman who lived in a lesbian union and spent her time conversing with poor blacks in Marianao, Cabrera raised eyebrows and experienced some social marginalization. In the mid-twentieth century all that was not Eurocentric was treated as deviant, and social scientists approached the study of Afro-Cubans from the assumption that they were the Other, situated outside "the social-symbolic order maintained by white Creoles" (p. 4).

Cabrera herself "deviated" as she charted new intellectual territory, challenging notions of objectivity and blossomed into a practitioner of anthropology "sin título." Rodríguez-Mangual rejects the common notion of Cabrera as a disciple of her brother-in-law, the venerated Fernando Ortiz. Instead, she argues that Cabrera's work "displays an alternative to Ortiz's hegemonic national project" (p. 12). Furthermore, Cabrera's project "anticipates the changes occurring in contemporary cultural studies by revealing the constructedness and artificiality of anthropological texts and by questioning the authority of scientific discourse in all her narrations" (p. 135). In general, Rodríguez-Mangual demonstrates that Cabrera's "cuentos" are not exactly stories as conventionally understood but hybrid texts that create "a fictitious space in which Afro-Cubans act as speaking subjects" (p. 21), thereby writ-

ing their culture into the nation. In Cabrera's texts, especially in the classic *El Monte*, the "Bible of Afro-Cuban Studies," an exceptional degree of agency is indeed accorded to the many, though mostly anonymous, Afro-Cuban informants who divulged the practices and secrets of their religion to the assiduous Cabrera.

Rodríguez-Mangual's book affords an in-depth analysis of a singular body of work. Yet there is reason to take exception to the first chapter's forceful deconstruction of the work of Fernando Ortiz. Faulting the pioneering ethnologist for a prose that always "remained mired" in ethnocentrism, Rodríguez-Mangual takes Ortiz to task for a failure to include "the dialogic voice of the Afro-Cuban" (p. 53). Precisely because Ortiz was deploying the social science discourses of the time, as Rodríguez-Mangual herself points out, further historical context should have been furnished to bring Ortiz's project into tighter focus. On the one hand, Ortiz wrote at a time when in "the developed world" eugenics was respected as scientific, and such authorities in sociology as Franklin Giddings (Columbia University), Edward Ross (University of Wisconsin), and Albion W. Small identified blacks with crime and venality. Not incidentally, all three men harbored extreme prejudice against blacks, immigrants, and women. Knowing the temper of the times, one should not castigate Ortiz as egregious. Secondly, Rodríguez-Mangual inexplicably omits consideration of the late Antonio Benítez-Rojo's concept of Ortiz's *Contrapunteo del tabaco y el azúcar* as a text that "proposes a Caribbean response to the matters of modernity and postmodernity."

Rodríguez-Mangual's last chapter offers a close reading of Cabrera's *Itinerarios del insomnio: Trinidad de Cuba* (1977) as a symbolic gesture in which present and past, Miami and Havana, exiles and islanders, are reunited, even as Rodríguez-Mangual, creates a parallel in merging social theory and literary practice into a "third space" of discursivity.

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The Costa Rica Reader: History, Culture, Politics. Edited by Steven Palmer and Iván Molina. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Pp. xiv, 383. Maps. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. $22.95 paper.

Editing a comprehensive reader like this one is a bit like teaching a survey course. You must create a coherent narrative emphasizing major themes, while acknowledging historical specificity and challenging stereotypes and preconceptions. On top of this, you need to incorporate enough drama, human interest, and anecdote to keep your audience engaged, without distracting them. Having co-edited one of Duke's Readers myself (*The Cuba Reader* [2004]), and taught far too many survey courses, I am all too aware of the challenges, and the satisfactions, of the endeavor.

Stereotypes and preconceptions abound regarding Costa Rica, even among Latin Americanists. Although the "myth of rural democracy" that characterized Costa Rica's historiography prior to recent decades has been challenged on multiple levels