The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature by Sarah M. Quesada (review)

Anke Birkenmaier

Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures, Volume 7, Number 2, Spring 2023, pp. 173-176 (Review)

Published by Indiana University Press

Reviews

Sarah M. Quesada, *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. 290.

Sarah Quesada's book *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature* inaugurates a field-changing approach to criticism in Latin American and Latinx literature. Quesada reads a cross-section of Latin American and Latinx literature by some of the most notable authors of the last fifty years: Junot Díaz, Achy Obejas, Gabriel García Márquez, Rudolfo Anaya, and Tomás Rivera. Their labeling, in the book's title, as "Latinx" or "Caribbean" is descriptive yet almost too modest, because Quesada's scope of study is specific and yet draws out hemispheric and Atlantic dimensions of cultural exchange for us. What she calls a "Latin-African axis" not only connects Latinx and Caribbean literature to the monuments and cultural expressions of West Africa but inverts the direction of the gaze and reveals African epistemologies underpinning Latin American and Latinx literature all along. A scholar trained in African studies, Latin American and Latinx literature, Quesada's method is informed by both literary criticism and anthropological fieldwork: she mines literature with Michel de Certeau spatially, and inversely, visits the UNESCO slave route in Africa and colonial archives in France to read memory sites as literature. She expands our understanding of the roles fiction takes on, not only in literature but also in everyday practice, in proverbs, and in the stories told by travel guides, as well as in the written archive.

Quesada's book uniquely brings together the pathbreaking work done on the Black Atlantic by Paul Gilroy and border-transgressing books by Kirsten Silva-Gruesz, and José David Saldívar's on "Transamerican" Latino writing. Distinct from them, she emphasizes both the north-south and transatlantic dimensions of Latinx literature. Her book's focus lies on the last eighty years of literary production and interactions, associated obliquely with the foundation of UNESCO in 1945, particularly the World Heritage Site program, which began in the 1970s. Theoretically most interesting is her concept of the "textual memorial," which builds on Maurice Halbwachs's cultural memory, Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, and Marianne Hirsch's postmemory. Yet, Quesada is less interested in the ways in which intergenerational memory and specific sites or monuments complement or contradict written historical accounts, and instead points to memories that maintain a ghostly presence, disturbing common perceptions of aesthetic

Chiricú Journal, Vol. 7.2, pp. 173–176

coherence and local knowledge transmission. Quesada's textual memorials are sites that surface in stories told in Latin American and Latinx literature, providing perspective on what is told and pointing to an elsewhere that turns the present time on its head.

In keeping with her theory of time read backwards, Quesada's book proceeds backwards. Its first chapter, on fear in Junot Díaz's short story "Monstro" (2012), is situated in our current neoliberal era, reading Díaz's satirical science-fiction account of an epidemic of blackness and zombification in the Dominican Republic in relation to the UNESCO slave route site Ouidah in West Africa, where Vodun has also been rewritten into history. Quesada shows perceptively why Vodun became associated with Haiti and how it has been reclaimed more recently as African. This revisiting on both sides of the Atlantic of Vodun critically debunks myths of monstrosity and "releases [the zombie] from colonial discourse" as Quesada writes (75), inviting instead south-south solidarity across the Atlantic. The second chapter is set during Cuba's Special Period in Times of Peace, at the end of the Cold War when the dissolution of the Soviet Union produced a profound economic crisis, leading to the Cuban rafters' exodus of 1993–1994. In Quesada's reading, Achy Obejas's novel *Ruins* shows how the commodification of Cuban society includes the memory of Cuba's engagement across the Atlantic, in the war in Angola. Quesada compares this to the slave route site Badagry in Nigeria, mentioned in the novel, similarly under critique for its neoliberal commercialization of the memory of slavery. The third chapter, on Gabriel García Márquez's journalistic chronicles from the 1970s of Cuba's Operación Carlota in Angola, is set earlier, in the revolutionary independence movements after World War II yet with focus on the same war. Quesada reads García Márquez's chronicles together with his better known *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, to argue that García Márquez's move away, in the 1970s, from magic realism highlights the impact of his Angola chronicles on his literary writing. Yet, as Quesada shows, his deep engagement with a Marxist Latin-Africa, was obliterated later on in debates on magic realism and world literature. Finally, her fourth chapter, on Rudolfo Anaya's classic coming-of-age novel *Bless Me, Última* and Tomás Rivera's *Y no se lo tragó la tierra,* is set at the end of World War II. Quesada's analysis of these books uncovers important African myths and travel accounts, which are present in distorted form, such as the references, in Rivera's poem "Searching at Leal Middle School," to Henry M. Stanley's travel account of the African Congo and, in *Bless Me, Última*, to the African myth of the golden carp. Pointing again to similar memorialization efforts on the African slave route, Quesada interprets these distorted representations of African history and spirituality as fundamental to a shared Latin-African tradition. Here in particular, her comparative approach to texts typically read as regionalist borderland texts allows us to see instead their cosmopolitan, world literature dimension.

Quesada's book is persuasive and original in its approach and historicization of the hidden connections between African and Latin American literature and culture. As I have discussed elsewhere, the end of World War II was indeed a watershed moment where intellectual networks and institutions in defense of a shared Afro-Hispanic and Afro-American culture collapsed, as was the case with the short-lived Mexico-based International Institute of Afro-American Studies (1943–1945) (*The Specter of Races*, 98–101). With the beginning of the Cold War, the United States Department of Education began to invest in the rise of distinct "area studies" and the lively dialogue, during the 1930s and 1940s, between Afro-Latin American, Afro-American, and Brazilian anthropologists, writers, and artists ended. Quesada's study reveals that a trans-American and Atlantic dialogue morphed and continued in literary works that we don't necessarily associate with a larger than regional dimension, yet that deserve to be read as world literature in the fullest sense.

Inevitably, with a book of this ambition, there will be some things that don't enter. For example, Quesada's discussion of Alejo Carpentier as a precursor emphasizes his own "heritage tourism at Haiti's UNESCO-site" of Sans Souci—UNESCO, of course, didn't exist yet in 1942 when Carpentier visited—, neglecting to mention the many anthropological and archival sources available to him when writing his novel *El reino de este mundo*. While her archive is rich and forward-looking in that her focus on textual memorials allows her to include tourism sites, oral sayings, and contemporary storytelling, I wonder how it relates to earlier evocations of African diaspora cultures as they appear in novels by Haitian writer Jacques Roumain, for example.

All in all, Quesada's book has opened a two-way street of traffic between African and Latinx/American literature to scholars in Latinx, Latin American, African, and world literature, which I hope will become a lively site for future debates, as it makes us rethink world literature along new axes, following the migrations of capital and people around the Atlantic.

Anke Birkenmaier
Indiana University, Bloomington

doi:10.2979/chiricu.7.2.14

Anke Birkenmaier is Professor and Chair of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Indiana University, Bloomington. She has published widely on Latin American and Cuban literature, sound studies, and international avant-garde movements. Her first, award-winning book, *Alejo Carpentier y la cultura del surrealismo en América Latina* (2006), explores Cuban writer Alejo

Carpentier's early years in Paris and collaborations with dissident surrealists and radio pioneers. Her second book, *The Specters of Race: Latin American Anthropology and Literature between the Wars* (2016), is a study of the interconnected scientific and literary networks challenging received notions of race and culture in the time between the two world wars. She is currently editing a collective volume, *Alejo Carpentier in Context*.

Amanda V. Ellis, *Letras y Limpias: Decolonial Medicine and Holistic Healing in Mexican American Literature*. University of Arizona Press, 2021. Pp. 297.

Amanda V. Ellis's book traces the narrative representation of the holistic medicine of *curanderismo*—the enduring traditional practices of folk healing—in Mexican American literature. Rooting her theoretical framework in Gloria Anzaldúa's pervasive metaphor of *la herida abierta* of the border, Ellis explores traditional healing practices both as a historical, self-protective response against the abject cruelty of colonialism in sixteenth-century Mexico and as a continued spiritual practice of decolonial feminism that opposes the vestiges of colonialism—sexism, racism, machismo, and classism.

Ellis focuses her two-part analysis on the cultural figure of the *curandero/a*, or traditional folk healer, providing a comprehensive account of the representation of curanderos throughout Mexican American literary history. Her historical approach highlights the trajectory of their representation in Mexican American literature from one-dimensional mystical *brujas* to complex figures who subvert cultural and heteronormative expectations. Ellis's chronological organization lends support to her central thesis: Mexican American authors have continued to draw on these traditions as a persistent source of spiritual and cultural healing and to challenge Eurocentric ideologies present in contemporary cultural and biomedical practices, incrementally expanding the role of the curandera in Mexican American art, culture, and daily life.

Chapter 1 grounds Ellis's ensuing studies in *El Códice de la Cruz Badiano*—a sixteenth-century illustrated herbal compendium of Mesoamerica's medicinal plants commissioned by Spanish conquerors, which she puts forth as the foundational text of Mexican folk healing. Ellis argues that beyond providing the underpinnings of botanical healing traditions, the historical context in which the text was created illustrates the role of traditional healing practices in early conflicts between Indigenous peoples and their colonizers. The text has practical and symbolic significance as a source of healing "operative in a historical context wrought by the manifold wounds of colonialism" (30) due to its preservation of Indigenous