



The African heritage of Latinx and Caribbean literature

Sarah M. Quesada, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
Studies in World Literature, New York, 2022, 290pp., \$99.99, ISBN:
978-1316514351 (hardback)

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Accepted: 16 May 2023 / Published online: 14 June 2023

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“Who dreams of Africa when you can dream of Miami?” This evocative question, posed to Usnavy, the protagonist of Achy Obejas’s *Ruins* (2009), only begins to encapsulate the “Latin-African” and “South-South” literary cartographies structuring Sarah M. Quesada’s superb book, *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*. Quesada sets the scene in the Cuban American’s novel: revolution true-believer Usnavy and his fed-up friend Obdulio are watching *balseros* depart Cojimar, in 1994, during Cuba’s Special Period in the Time of Peace, when Fidel Castro opened the island to tourists and many Cubans left on makeshift rafts. Contrasting Obdulio’s material motives, Usnavy imagines recuperating a glorious African past. His distorted, commodified visions of Africa are derived from his “internationalist archive” (78) of Hemingway (who wrote *The Old Man and the Sea* in Cojimar), Picasso and Lam (who appropriated African art forms), and Louis Comfort Tiffany, whose namesake lamp is Usnavy’s prized possession, and who, Quesada reports, owned a Miami mansion. In Quesada’s study, the implication lands forcefully: dreams of Africa and Miami aren’t separate dreams but rather form complex axes of centuries of dreams (and nightmares) of escape and refuge.

In Latinx studies, 1990s Cuba may be well-traveled ground. Yet, alongside Éric Morales-Franceschini’s *Epic of Cuba Libre* (2022), Quesada deftly redraws its maps by excavating its ignored, disavowed, and erased African dimensions. *Ruins* offers one example of what she calls “a Latin-African borderland” (97), putting her study’s water borders in dialogue with Marisel C. Moreno’s *Crossing Waters* (2022). Quesada’s other case studies include Junot Díaz’s “Monstro” (2012), Gabriel García Márquez’s *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981), and Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). Quesada assembles these far-flung texts through the idea of “textual memorials” (1). The concept invites—you

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“visit” a text like you “read” a site—and the practice of conceptualizing “texts as sites to be visited, and sites as texts to be read” (219) produces sturdy results.

Through impressive fieldwork and archival research, Quesada excavates the imprint of African epistemologies, histories, spiritual practices, and proverbs on Latinx writing. To do so, she pairs each “textual site” (158) with a UNESCO Slave Route. In *Ruins*, for instance, Usnavy evokes two, in Badagry (Nigeria) and Gorée (Senegal). If anything, Quesada’s reading of “Monstro” is craftier: Díaz’s narrator doesn’t reveal *his* inspirations. She sources Díaz’s representations of Haitian zombies on the UNESCO Vodun trail in Ouidah, Benin, with its monumental Door of No Return, as well as in the colonial archive. I admired her idea that Díaz’s racialized zombies are “Latin-African textual memorials” (159) prophesying climate devastation. But because this analysis repairs the Dominican archive’s anti-Haitian elements, I reread Díaz’s “ecoparable” (36) to see for myself. I still found “Monstro” utterly seductive but so brutal and totalizing in its destruction that I landed a short distance from Quesada’s position that it “rehabilitates” the zombie “as the sole survivor of a futuristic apocalypse” (73). I also wondered, amid the ongoing pandemic, about the story’s sources and vectors. Does “Monstro” equally index Western fear of Ebola or the xenophobic slur “the China Virus,” the latter occasioning the Latinx-Asian connections of Long Le-Khac’s *Giving Form to an Asian and Latinx America* (2020)? Rather than rehabilitate, does “Monstro” conjure an Afrofuturist “Door of No Return” from catastrophic climate change? Yet even these alternative queries emerged resolutely from Quesada’s generative Latin-African framework.

In Quesada’s compelling portraits of the trails that make up UNESCO’s Slave Routes, I was transported to the US-Mexico borderlands even before I reached discussions of Tomás Rivera and Rudolfo Anaya. At first glance, I was unsure about her title’s keyword “Heritage,” but its reference to heritage tourism quickly came into sharp relief. This context became even more resonant each time I encountered the word “trail,” when I heard its deadly echoes with the migrant trail. Likewise, in the Slave Route’s “stations,” I heard both the Border Patrol’s official stations and the water stations clandestinely placed in the Sonoran Desert by No More Deaths volunteers. These Latin-African trails vibrate across colonial modernity’s space-time. In blazing trails overgrown with racism and neglect, Quesada’s precise prose engenders new connections among them.

Quesada’s methodology demonstrates a refreshing faith in socially engaged scholarship. Consider her readings of “Latin-African hauntings” (160) in Rivera’s “Searching at Leal Middle School” (1992) and Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*. Both texts borrow unselfconsciously from colonial scripts (i.e., John Gregory Bourke’s “The American Congo” and Henry M. Stanley’s *In Darkest Africa*). In interviews, Rivera admits Stanley’s book fascinated him as a child, and his autobiographical speaker recalls finding it in the school’s dumpster. Preempting objections, Quesada acknowledges that some readers would leave these works (Rivera’s included) in the trash, forgotten for good. Given the recent awfulness on the LA City Council, I’m inclined to agree with her that burying “the racial biases of Chicano literary production” (202), which manifest in “Searching” and *Bless Me* as racialized dichotomies of light and dark, would be a bad idea. Because such dismissals “perpetuate myths



of an ‘evil’ darkness” (202), I was heartened by her claim that critics can reframe writers’ dodgy representations of race for pedagogical purposes.

This tricky dynamic underlies *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*. To her great credit, Quesada finds the line in these texts between reproducing and critiquing racism. I was likewise moved by her choice of terms. She prefers “Latin” for reasons historical (in 1975, Castro famously called Cuba a “Latin-African nation”) and practical (Latinx and Latin America’s shared root). Given that “Latinx” and Latinidad are under scrutiny for anti-Blackness (see Alan Pelaez Lopez and Tatiana Flores, “Latinidad Is Cancelled”), why not revive a radical genealogy of the problematic “Latin”? I thought of Johanna Fernández’s *Young Lords: A Radical History* (2020), which illustrates the enduring relevance of the Lords. Of their newspaper, *Palante*, a “Latin Revolutionary News Service.” Of Pedro Pietri’s “Puerto Rican Obituary” (1971), which summons “Latin souls.” Of Hurray for the Riff Raff’s “Palante” (2018), which resurrects Pietri’s “Latin souls” for a new generation of alienated yet hungry young people.

Ultimately, *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature* makes an airtight case for the significance of Latin-African conjunctions. Less certain are the stakes, beyond enhanced visibility, of Latinx literature’s inclusion in world literature. (The book features in the Cambridge Studies in World Literature series.) This relation brings me to the fascinating chapter on the Colombian writer, and world literature stalwart, Gabriel García Márquez. I cannot count the times when, after telling someone I teach Latino literature, they respond, *Oh, like García Márquez?* This mistake can be productive, but it often reinforces world literature’s hierarchy of Latin American and US Latinx writers. The trails blazed by Sarah M. Quesada scramble this received order.

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