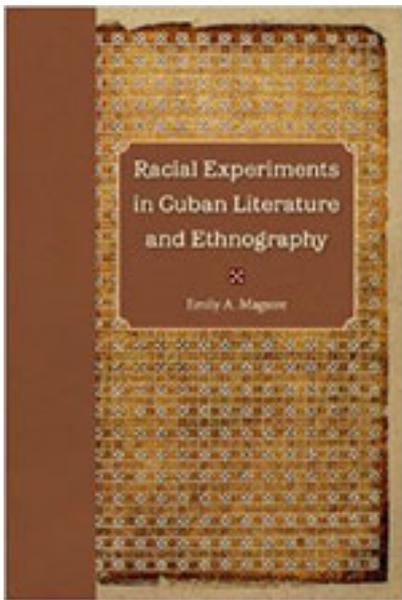


## ***Racial Experiments in Cuban Literature and Ethnography* by Emily A. Maguire**

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With the increasing erosion of racial equality in Cuba, the specters of race have again risen to the forefront of academic and activist debates about Cuban culture and politics, both on and off the island (De la Fuente 2008). In his polemical 2013 article “For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn’t Begun,” published in the *New York Times*, the black Cuban intellectual Roberto Zurbano signaled this erosion to U.S. mainstream culture.<sup>1</sup> Zurbano points out how the Cuban government’s slow but steady development of economic liberalization and privatization policies since the 1990s has had a negative impact on black Cubans, who continue to face racism in everyday life, and who receive fewer remittances, earn less money, and own less property than whites. As Zurbano underscores, this rise in racial inequality is grounded in “longstanding racial conflicts.” In the last twenty-five years, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have scrutinized more and more this history of racist violence and struggle for racial equality, analyzing the shifting meanings of blackness in Cuba and how they intersect with overlapping conceptions of community, nationhood, and global black consciousness.

Emily Maguire’s *Racial Experiments in Cuban Literature and Ethnography* is a welcome addition to this expanding archive, in particular to studies of racial representation in post-independence Cuba. Seamlessly integrating historical contextualization with close readings of influential literary and ethnographic texts, Maguire offers us a nuanced comparative analysis of Cuban “racial experiments” from the early-twentieth century to

the first years of the Cuban Revolution. For Maguire, canonical writers such as Nicolás Guillén, Alejo Carpentier, Fernando Ortiz, and Lydia Cabrera “experimented” with a broad repertoire of rhetorical devices, aesthetic forms, and subject positions in order to confront the aporias of race and nation in Cuba. Appropriating elements from the European avant-garde and Cuban popular culture, these writers were central in shaping what Maguire calls Cuba’s “ethnographic spirit” (21). As Maguire explains, the ascent of this “spirit” in the 1920s and 1930s coincided with the emergence of “Afrocubanismo”—a mostly white elite movement that celebrated and appropriated African-descended cultural expression, principally *son* and other musical and dance practices, as a signifier of Cuba’s hybrid national culture, or what Fernando Ortiz would describe as its “mestizaje de cocinas, mestizaje de razas, mestizaje de culturas” in his famous definition of *cubanidad*. Maguire takes into account how such discourses often served to “harness and at the same time neutralize cultural blackness on the island in order to identify Cuba as a modern nation,” reading the interventions of Ortiz and his contemporary writers as part of a “literary community of texts” (21, 103). At the same time, this national community of discourses not only intervened in local struggles to redefine the Cuban body politic, but also redefined itself through transatlantic and hemispheric publics, in conversation, for instance, with avant-garde primitivists in Paris and with the Harlem Renaissance movement.

Although *Racial Experiments* follows a multivocal framework, there is a clear protagonist among the community of writers examined in *Racial Experiments*: Lydia Cabrera. The figure of Cabrera appears in each of the book’s four chapters and its epilogue, holding together the narrative of the book. Maguire does not clarify this choice, leaving the reader to decipher the significance of Cabrera to her argument. Thankfully, the chapters’ comparative analyses—Cabrera is paired with Ortiz, Carpentier, Guillén, and Miguel Barnet, while the engrossing last chapter analyzes Cabrera’s masterpiece on Afro-Cuban religion, *El Monte* (1950), alongside Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men* (1935)—assists us in explaining Cabrera’s central role in the network of relations traced in the book. For most of the twentieth century, Cabrera’s innovative literary and ethnographic contributions have been overshadowed by the work of her male peers, especially her mentor, the so-called father of modern Cuban anthropology, Fernando Ortiz, whose ideas continue to exert vast authority in the study of Afro-Cuban cultures today. Yet, recent years have witnessed a shift in this regard: scholars such as Flora González-Mandri and Adriana González-Mangual have celebrated Cabrera’s originality and her negotiation of her own space of creation within largely male intellectual circles. Highlighting this shift, Maguire pays close attention to the textual strategies that make Cabrera’s work remarkable, contrasting it with the “predetermined narrative” of national teleology that Ortiz, Carpentier, and, to a lesser extent, Guillén, seek to articulate through representations of black authenticity (57).<sup>2</sup> Through the mixture of literary and ethnographic conventions, the inclusion of “performative, experiential elements,” the foregrounding of her informants’ voices, and a narrative structured “around ideas of space and containment” instead of historical development,

Cabrera produces an alternative archive that, in the words of Maguire, “accord[s] Afro-Cuban culture its own place” (56, 33). In other words, Cabrera’s “racial experiments” highlight the specificity of Afro-Cuban cultural practices without inserting them within a homogeneous discourse of *mestizaje* or *cubanidad*.

At the same time, Maguire is not interested in merely offering us another celebratory reading of Cabrera: the most significant contribution of her book is that it illuminates the contradictions in Cabrera’s work, as part of the broader “community of texts” in which she participated. Aside from her privilege as a white, upper class Cuban, which can be detected, for instance, in paternalistic asides she makes to “nuestros negros” (60), Maguire analyzes how Cabrera delimits Afro-Cuban cultures as isolated, static spaces where the fluidity and politics of cultural production are downplayed, if not altogether disregarded. This critique is developed more fully in the last chapter, which examines how Cabrera and Hurston subvert “ethnographic authority” through their works, calling attention to the performative elements of ethnography by, on one hand, foregrounding their informants’ voices and, on the other, downplaying their role as “experts.” For Maguire, the key difference between Cabrera and Hurston lies in the former’s delineation of herself as a “cultural outsider,” which ultimately “reinforce[s] the boundaries separating [Afro-Cuban religious practice] from other aspects of Cuban culture” (171).

A criticism that may be leveled at Maguire in connection to this argument is that, aside from Hurston, she does not explore in detail other alternatives to Cabrera’s ethnographic model. What of other voices of African descent operating in Cuba during the same period, such as Rómulo Lachatañeré, Eusebia Cosme, and Gustavo Urrutia, who reflected on and performed the relationship between blackness, nationhood, and international ideals from other angles? Maguire’s usage of the category “Afro-Cuban” to identify both culture and subjects might also be an issue of contention for some, since the latter have generally identified themselves in the twentieth century as black or *mulato* (and more recently, as *afrodescendientes*).

Beyond these minor qualms, *Racial Experiments* succeeds in considering the ethnographic and literary experiments of the Cuban elite in a new light, as a community of discourses that both subvert and reproduce hegemonic narratives of race and nationhood in Cuba. At the same time, Maguire’s book signals towards the present and the problems Zurbano underscores in his *New York Times* article. As she says in the epilogue: “A return to these kind of narratives points to the ways in which the location of blackness within Cuba’s national narrative remains unresolved” (188). In helping us rethink the multivalent nature of these powerful constructs, *Racial Experiments* also invites us to consider how they haunt the present in uncanny ways, not only in Cuba, but across the Caribbean, the U.S., and other diasporic regions.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The publication of “For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn’t Begun” sparked a heated debate in both the U.S. and Cuba. Zurbano was dismissed from his post at the Casa de las Américas cultural center, while he accused the newspaper editors of changing the article’s original headline, “For Blacks in Cuba: the Revolution Hasn’t Yet Finished,” without his consent. AfroCubaWeb offers an extensive archive of articles and links that discuss in detail the “Zurbano affair” from diverse angles: <http://www.afrocubaweb.com/zurbano/zurbano-news.html#Articulos>

<sup>2</sup>In the case of Guillén, Maguire observes how, through the resignification of *son* and other Afro-Cuban cultural elements, the poems of *Motivos de son* (1930) and *Sóngoro Cosongo* (1931) “explore alternate visions of Cubanness” and “enact a new presentation of Afro-Cuban subjectivity” that does not necessarily coincide with discourses of nationhood, hybrid or otherwise (112).

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