

Review

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Daughters of the Diaspora: Afro-Hispanic Writers.

Miriam DeCosta-Willis, ed. Kingston, Jamaica:

Ian Randle Publishers, 2003.



Daughters of the Diaspora embarks on the important undertaking of mapping a literary tradition of Afro-Hispanic writers in the Spanish Caribbean, Central America, South America, North America and Africa. This collection contains poetry, fiction, essays and personal narratives by 20 writers that span the twentieth century, from Virginia Brindis de Salas, born in 1908, to Mayra Santos-Febres, born in 1966. Miriam DeCosta-Willis presents English translations of representative work of each author along with interviews and critical essays by 15 scholars. In this way, the anthology provides a critical context and maps each writer's contribution to a black women's literary tradition in the Spanish-speaking world.

In her introductory essay, DeCosta supplies a rich historical and literary context within which the writers presented in this anthology produced their work. She maps a fascinating set of connections between authors, themes and genres across countries and continents that lead her to assert the existence of a black women's literary tradition in the Spanish-speaking world. Beyond the writers whose works are presented in this collection, the references to many others in the Spanish Caribbean, Africa and South, Central and North America, suggest new and challenging possibilities for scholars interested in further research.

DeCosta-Willis describes her task in compiling this anthology as an "archeological project of excavating, preserving and disseminating the writing of African-descended women" (xiii). Early writers such as Juana Pastor and Cristina Ayala in Cuba and Virginia Brindis de Salas of Uruguay published in the periodical press. Julia de Burgos self-published her *Poema en veinte surcos*; other of her works were never published and were lost. Some of Brindis de Sala's works have been out of print for many years, or have disappeared. The search for writings by

black women in newspapers and other periodicals, as well as their self-published works, is a fascinating project that will surely reveal new works and uncover new authors in many Spanish-speaking countries.

In addition to locating the works, this project requires the naming of a subject that at the beginning of the century was excluded from a literary canon that was predominantly masculinist, racist and white. In written history, black and mulatta women are largely invisible; or when they are present, they are mentioned in passing or cited out of context. Thus, the archeological project embarked on in this anthology requires careful socio-historic contextualisation, and also often a reading against the grain in order to discover the strategies used by the writers to introduce themselves into the literary canon. Jean Franco (1989) in *Plotting Women* invited us to ponder over “the different forms of the struggle for interpretive power and what they meant within their socio-historic context” (xii). This strategy is also used by Magaly Roy-Féquièrre in *Women, Creole Identity, and Intellectual Life in Early Twentieth Century Puerto Rico* (2004).

This critical reading is challenging and complex, and generates a variety of interpretations of the texts and the positions of the writers on the debates they address. Carmen María Colón Pellot’s *Ambar Mulato* is an interesting case. In this volume, Claudette Williams recognises in Colón Pellot an affirmation of her mulatta racial identity, but sees her poetry mostly as a tragic illustration of the “internalization of the aesthetic, sexual and moral devaluation of the colored woman” (39). Williams interprets Colón Pellot’s use of the term “the perfect negro” (to distinguish presumably inferior full-blooded blacks from mulattoes) as a repudiation of African ancestry and fear of blackness. Gladys Jiménez Muñoz (2005) proposes a different interpretation of this author in her essay in another anthology titled *Contrapunto de Género y Raza en Puerto Rico*. She locates Colón Pellot within the discussions of national identity that sought to erase all linkages with Africa. In order to enter this dialogue, Colón Pellot uses her identity as a mulatta so that she can participate in a voice that is “legitimate” enough to be heard. Muñoz Jiménez argues that if Colón Pellot gives the impression of racial denial by evoking the myth of “the perfect negro”, it is only with the intention of exposing the mythical whiteness of Puerto Rican Creole nationalism. Hence, Colón Pellot’s affirmation that *all* Puerto Ricans have black blood in their veins “*jibara vetuada de sangre mulata*”. The controversies surrounding Colón Pellot’s work are definitely an example of the struggles for interpretative power by black women. DeCosta Willis’ compilation opens and widens these debates in a very significant way.

It must be noted that contemporary Afro-Hispanic women writers have indeed gained a space within the literary canon. An example of this is Mayra Santos Febres, whose work has been translated into English, Italian, French and German, and who has won various important international literary honours. Nonetheless, as Santos Febres states, women writers are expected to deal with certain themes and to write according to what she calls “the women’s literature” formula (454). “The existence of a Black writer in Latin America, or in the Caribbean to a lesser extent, is pretty precarious. If he or she does not become a token s/he becomes a symbol of national origin, of the past” (456).

There is no doubt that *Daughters of the Diaspora* fills an important space in the discussion of race, gender and the literary canon. It builds important connections throughout the Spanish-speaking world as well as making this literature more accessible to an English-speaking audience. It proposes and invites further contributions to an important, complex and intriguing research agenda.

References

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