

Changó, Decolonizing the African Diaspora**By Manuel Zapata Olivella, trans. Jonathan Tittler****Routledge, 2022. 432 pp.
ISBN: 9780367756543****María Constanza Guzmán / York University****Joshua Martin Price / Toronto Metropolitan University**

The re-publication of Manuel Zapata Olivella's seminal work in English translation couldn't be timelier. The Colombian Ministry of Culture designated 2020 the Year of Zapata Olivella, to coincide with the centennial of his birth. Commemorative events were organized. The Universidad del Valle, in collaboration with other institutes and universities, published a beautiful collection of Zapata Olivella's complete works and released it both in print and digitally in full text. Among other important publications there is *Entre ekobios: Manuel Zapata Olivella* (Millán y Rondón, eds., 2019), with notes on letters between Zapata Olivella and Langston Hughes.

Zapata Olivella was a polymath – a prolific writer of fiction, intellectual, anthropologist, ethnomusicologist and medical doctor. Born in Santa Cruz de Lorica, Córdoba, Colombia in 1920, he wrote over 10 novels, countless short stories, and several plays and essays. Zapata Olivella was also the founder of *Letras Nacionales*. *Created in 1965, this cultural magazine was one of the first publications to focus on Colombian authors and to foreground the work of Black and Indigenous writers.*

The publication of this centennial edition of *Changó* by Routledge Press is one of several actions that counter the historical invisibilization of Afro Colombian and Afro Latin American and Caribbean intellectuals and artists. There is a growing wealth of writers, past and present, whose works are becoming available, read, discussed, revisited, and incorporated, at long last, in the national and international literary spaces they had long been denied access to. It comes at a time of a larger revisiting of the canon and a renewed interest in voices of the African Diaspora.

Readers owe a debt to scholar Jonathan Tittler, who ably translated this novel and first published it in English as *Changó, the Biggest Baddass* (Texas Tech University Press, 2010)

and has now rereleased a slightly revised version as part of a Routledge series “Decolonizing the Classics.” An early translation into English of Zapata Olivella's work was *A Saint Is Born in Chima* (trans. Thomas Kooreman, Texas Pan

American Series year). This new edition features a lengthy introduction by William Luis, which begins by situating *Changó* in the context of the Latin American writers of the second half of the twentieth century, specifically of the Latin American Boom. It links Zapata Olivella with the Caribbean literary imagination, specifically with the work of Alejo Carpentier. Luis distinguishes Zapata Olivella's narrative style, his use of the literary first-person voice, “The stories detach themselves from writing and become personal and creditable accounts; they come to life and offer another perspective about their characters' experiences, one that had been erased or silenced by many dominant Western texts” (xv).

Centering in the Caribbean, the book moves across oceans and continents, from Africa to Brazil to New England, and tells of moments and figures from four centuries of oppression and displacement of the *muntu*, i.e., the people. In his preface or “Note to the Fellow Traveler,” Manuel Zapata Olivella invites the reader to enter his novel “like so many million African prisoners on the slave ships; and feel free despite your chains.” In this performative gesture, Zapata Olivella tries to recontextualize the reader “whatever your race, culture or class” in the Americas. He strips us, brings us through the horror of the Middle Passage, and through to the elusive promise of the New World: freedom. The first part of *Changó* could be called a sprawling epic poem. But the book is experimental in form, and different sections experiment with genre. Through a range of voices, including that of Benkos Biojo in Colombia, Henri Christophe in Haiti, Simón Bolívar in Venezuela, Aleijadinho in Brazil, or Malcolm X in Harlem, Zapata Olivella recounts the history of Afro-descendants from slavery, through liberation, and even into the administration of Barack Obama. The novel thus begins in the voice of Africa, much like Kamau Braithwaite's *Arrivants* or other epic sagas that attempt to grapple with the fractured, intertwined legacies, languages, and realities that constitute the Western hemisphere. He is, in a sense, attempting to write the great novel of the Americas.

With the translation of this incredible book, English-language readers can view Zapata Olivella in the context of

Aimé Césaire, Nicolás Guillén, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Franz Fanon, Alejo Carpentier, Édouard Glissant, Fernando Ortiz, WEB Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Derek Walcott, and so many others who have documented the Black Diaspora, especially in the Americas, through poetry, essay, fiction, and trenchant critique. In this case, the book combines elements of each; indeed, Zapata Olivella describes the book as comprising five novels, each with its own style and protagonists, with a link supplied by the orishas who appear throughout, and a central concern with Black people in the ongoing saga of the Americas.

One can see the traces of many of these authors in these pages, as well as how Zapata Olivella was in dialogue with many of these figures. For example, in writing of the Reconstruction period in the United States in the wake of the Civil War, Zapata Olivella takes up W.E.B. Du Bois' thesis in his magisterial *Black Reconstruction in America*, framing Black people as actors (and not just passive victims) in the possibilities offered by Reconstruction in the South and the eventual defeat of democracy implicit in Reconstruction.

Although Zapata Olivella is a central figure of 20th century Colombian and Latin American letters, his work has not been

as widely studied as that of other writers of his generation. In his introduction to *Challenging the Black Atlantic* (2020), John T. Maddox notes that, having been written before Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, Zapata Olivella's Afro-Colombian historical novel traced a genealogy of the diaspora and included the entire New World history of Afro-descendants in its 675 pages (1). *The Afro-Hispanic Review* published two special issues on Zapata Olivella. His work has also been reviewed in *Publication of the Afro-Latin American Research*, *Callaloo*, the *Latin American Research Review*, and others.

The Asociación de Colombianistas has foregrounded Zapata Olivella's work. There are also works on the author in French, including a book-length study by François Bogliolo and Zapata Olivella's own autobiography. With the republication of his works—so complete and accessible—and this English edition of *Changó*, and a growing number of critical works about this central figure in Latin American and Caribbean letters, readers and potential readers of Zapata Olivella in the Americas now, more than ever before, have robust sources to get to know his work, and comprehend the depth and breadth of his intellectual production.