

The Legacy of Manuel Zapata Olivella

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Resumen

En la esfera literaria y en unos cien años, ¿cuál sería el legado del Dr. Manuel Zapata Olivella (1920-2004)? A pesar de su presencia pública por más de setenta años, todavía existen profesores y críticos que lo ven sólo como hombre de acción, mientras otros aprecian su lado creador o lo consideran un hombre de ideas. Para los más entusiasmados, el Dr. Zapata ha sido una de las figuras más destacadas en varias cuestiones sociales, sobre todo las de clase y raza en Latinoamérica y especialmente en su Colombia natal. Otro grupo más reducido aún de profesores conocen su manera particular de convertir las constantes de su temática en excelente literatura. Estos profesores comprenden que el estilo va acompañado de una sustancia concreta en sus obras. Para la comunidad académica en general y fuera de los estudios afro-latinos o en el mundo “real” de gente no académica, el Dr. Zapata sigue siendo el ejemplo perenne del escritor de talento o del defensor del pueblo. Este ensayo muestra la importancia del Dr. Zapata como creador y activista cuyo talento intelectual asimila todos los aspectos de su ser.

Palabras clave: legado intelectual; diáspora; letras afrocolombianas

Abstract

One hundred years from now, what will be the legacy of Dr. Manuel Zapata Olivella (1920-2004) in the world of letters? It is clear that, despite his public presence for more than seventy years, some prefer to think of him solely as a man of action, while others appreciate him as a person of creative letters or as a man of ideas. For the Zapata enthusiasts since the 1970s, he has been a mainstay of what we know about class and racial distinctions in his native Colombia particularly and broadly speaking in the whole of Latin America. A smaller cadre of scholars appreciates the particular manner of rendering his thoughtful and well-researched thematic constants into great literature. These scholars know that style accompanies substance in his works. For the broader communities outside of Afro-Latin scholarship--whether within other disciplines of academia, or in the “real world,” of people whose lives and experiences are not governed by scholarly pursuits--he remains the perennial “writer to watch”, the “up-and-coming talent” or the “champion of the people”. This essay discusses the importance of viewing Zapata as a creator and an activist whose intellectual prowess informed every aspect of his being.

Key words: intellectual legacy, Diaspora, Afro-Colombian letters

When asked to consider submitting an essay on Manuel Zapata Olivella, I agreed to do so without hesitation. It is because of my unabashed admiration for his intellect--a high regard that

continues to grow rather than diminish with the passing years and since my first contact with him as an undergraduate student many, many years ago. What also compels me to write on the subject of his intellectual contribution is the understanding that, over the decades since he began contributing to world knowledge, the fame and recognition that he desired continue to elude this great thinker and writer even to this day. Although he was often discussed as a candidate for the Nobel Prize for literature among the Zapata cognoscenti, coherent efforts to bring this project to fruition never crystallized, and upon his death, that unrealized aspiration of his supporters died with the writer.¹ This essay is guided in part by penitence and in part by the continued need for the development of critical tools with which to write about writers of African descent in Latin America, specifically in this case Manuel Zapata Olivella.

It may appear to be old-fashioned and even counter-productive to think in terms of an intellectual's recognition and not just his critical reception. Yet, recognition matters, and we kid ourselves if we say that it does not. Public intellectuals, artists, activists, and anyone else wishing to share their thoughts with the world beyond themselves are no different from those of us in academia. Admittedly for some who teach at universities and colleges, recognition is merely a means to an end—to gain the next promotion or salary increase. However, for other colleagues, it is the self-satisfaction of knowing that the hard work and thought that was placed in a particular subject area is valued by others. Zapata, like the majority of intellectuals, manifested a desire for this type of recognition.

Major Works by Zapata

Manuel Zapata Olivella began writing in the late 1940s, publishing both travel writings and fictional pieces closely tied to his life experiences. His first published work of fiction would be *Tierra mojada*, 1947 (Wetlands), and it narrates the happenings in the daily lives of its characters of a fictional small town that is somewhat similar to his own place of birth, Lorica. *Pasión Vagabunda*, 1949 (Vagabond Passion) chronicles his travels from his native Colombia through Central America and up to Mexico. *He visto la noche*, 1949 (I Have Seen the Night) provides a detailed and penetrating account of his sojourn throughout the United States and largely through the eyes of an Afro-Colombian observing United States race relations and intra-racial interactions first hand. He would go on to publish one other strictly defined travel narrative in 1955, *China 6 A.M.* However, the remainder of his writings would be influenced by these experiences and his never-ceasing wanderlust until the time of his death. Moreover, despite the different paths that his creative works would take over the years, many of the themes of these early works will remain throughout his career, receiving sharper focus. For example, his

concern for the plight of the poor imbues virtually each work that he writes. Increasingly black people constitute the core of his literature, even while he expresses interest in all of the “underdogs” of society. By the time of his 1963 novel *Chambacú, corral de negros*, (*Chambacú, Black Slum*) black people begin to occupy a central location in his writings. This is true even though he continued to publish creative works on other aspects of Colombian society, including, the poor and other ethnic groups.

In the wake of the explosion of world-wide interest in Latin American literature, including new narrative style that was not limited to the “boom” writers,² Zapata “took himself to the wood shed,” so to speak, and re-examined his writing style. Again, his thematic focus would remain mostly the same. He was not silent in terms of publishing, as he made available to the world several studies on Colombian society. These works informed the next phase of his literary writing, starting with the brilliant *Changó, el gran putas*,³ 1983 and continuing until his last published work before his death *El árbol brujo de la libertad*, 2002 (The Bewitching Tree of Liberty). From his first writings in the 1940s until his last work at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Zapata remained constant in his subject matter, if not his style.

There is evidence that the name of Manuel Zapata Olivella is familiar to a growing body of world citizens. Yet, this recognition is usually in one arena or another and rarely as Zapata, “the complete package”. Some know of his literary talent, particularly the latter portion of his works beginning with *Changó, el gran putas*. Others are familiar with him as an activist in his native Colombia or as a fervent advocate for African Diaspora rights. An older generation knew of his talents as a medical doctor, specifically as a psychiatrist. It is his intellectual endowment that I address here—a gift that does not negate other aspects of his being, but rather highlights how these various components of his life and work intertwine. In Zapata, political and social activism relate to a definition of Latin America, as it relates to Diaspora cultures, as they relate to psychiatry, as it relates to literature, and as they all combine to shape his intellectual legacy that will endure well into the future. For those not closely familiar with his works, his activism tends to obscure his intellectualism.

Activist, Creative Writer *and* Intellectual

It is a commonplace that there can never be a true separation between art and lived experiences. Yet, it is a useful exercise to consider the differences between those artists who consciously choose to attempt to change the world in which they live and artists who, by sheer virtue of their humanity, reveal some level of connection to the world outside of their art. Many terms already exist to refer to the former—artists who purposely engage the world around them, preferring not to isolate themselves from secular concerns. “Engagé,” “committed writer,” “public intellectual,” and even “creative intellectuals” are but a few. I argue, however, that Zapata is more than a creative intellectual or any of the terms that often describes artists who insist on making a difference in their cultures. Instead, Zapata is a “triple threat” in letters: a creator, an activist, *and* an intellectual. This differs from the concept of an engaged writer because the Afro-Colombian never ceased one activity in order to initiate a different one. Undoubtedly this is because of his personality

that refused to separate one area of his life from another. At the same time, it is a recognizable pattern of writers of his generation who preceded the “boom” writers in Latin America. For students of Latin American literature and culture, it should come as no surprise that Zapata, while launching his literary career, worked in several arenas outside of literature. Essays, travel narratives, and speeches offer the reader a profound entry into this Afro-Colombian’s world-view. Starting as early as 1949 with the travel narrative *Pasión vagabunda* and continuing into the early years of the twenty-first century, his writings and thoughts never ceased to spark a fire of ideas in his readers and audiences. In addition, and just as importantly, the ideas of Zapata are manifest in the works of other writers and critics.

Here are but a few of the highlights of his long and exemplary intellectual contribution.

Manuel Zapata Olivella founded the journal *Letras nacionales* (National Letters), and with others like his wife Rosa Bosch Zapata, ensured its regular publication over the years. True to Zapata’s focus on the non-elite, the magazine offered the most consistent and coherent focus on popular everyday culture in his native Colombia. To this day and more than fifteen years after it ceased publication, there are few journals that match the depth and longevity of its purpose. It was sponsored by the Fundación Colombiana de Investigaciones Folclóricas, of which Dr. Zapata was also a founding member. With subject matter like the characteristics of *vallenato* music, the black in Colombian literature, popular dance, and “committed” theater, the journal is a treasure of archival data that provides much of the foundation for what we now take for granted in the realm of ideas and culture. It reveals that Zapata was well ahead of his time in both his activism and his ideas—ideas and methods of sharing them that are only now acceptable to the larger public. One can only hope that the complete digitalization of this and other important publications is within the scope of Colombia’s efforts to preserve its past.

To the degree that Manuel Zapata managed to open doors of knowledge and interest in Colombia’s black presence, he remains a seminal figure in the whole of Colombian letters.⁴ As one of the founders of the Folkloric Institute in Colombia and as a mentor to so many who came after him, Zapata is comparable to Franz Boaz in universities within the United States. He brought to the fore new areas of knowledge that few in his native Colombia were aware of prior to his involvement. Tellingly, he is someone who reveled in field work, along with his sister Delia. That field work in turn became the grist for much of his literary outpouring. In this sense, he is similar to the older Fernando Ortiz in Cuba because of his resolute pursuit of Afro-Cuban cultures—scholarship that served as the basis of so many creative works about all of Latin America. One also can compare him with the older Zora Neale Hurston in her celebration of Afro-United States culture. What should be evident is that Zapata, along with his sister Delia, introduced Colombia to a greater part of itself.⁵

Beyond Colombia, Zapata was an active organizer and participant in the Primer Congreso de la Cultura Negra de las Américas (First Congress/Conference of Black Culture in the Americas) of 1977. However, despite his work since the inception of the congress, even some who write about the momentous event are not aware of his contribution. In addition, as a constant

organizer, Zapata, along with other young talents of the time, planned group protests to create awareness of black culture in the early 1940s:

It was in 1943 in Bogotá that we began our first statement about an African presence as we organized the day of black people. The majority of those present were students from the Pacific Coast, and the only ones from the Atlantic coast were Aquiles [Escalante] and I. We shouted like some crazy people, believing that by the year 2000 Africa was going to be liberated. [Translation mine]⁶

The significance of his early organizing abilities in conjunction with his intellectual import in general should not be overlooked. The fact of his much earlier active involvement in opening channels of discussion about Afro-Colombians should alter our perceptions of the beginnings of his black consciousness. Rather than seeing his awareness of a black self as a gradual development, we now understand that we should think of it as part of his childhood upbringing. Many, who write about Zapata's early influences, including this author, often speak of his friendship with Langston Hughes as a life-altering experience, even when we acknowledge the presence of Rogelio Velásquez in the young Zapata. In addition, Zapata's own *Levántate, mulato* aids in our understanding of his way of viewing the world (López, María Adelaida, Director. *Manuel Zapata Olivella, abridor de caminos*, 2007. <http://manuelzapataolivella.org/acerca-de/> 12/2010).

As further testament to his intellectual prowess as well as his Diaspora leanings, it bears reminding that the Afro-Colombian and university-trained psychiatrist is the self-proclaimed heir to the legacy of the Martinican and developing world strategist Frantz Fanon (Captain-Hidalgo 1993, 14, 21, 116-117) To this day, Fanon remains one of the earliest embodiments of the developing world's ability to absorb Western ideas and then use those ideas in its own way, specifically here psychiatry, as a means of first understanding the self and secondly to alter the world around her or him. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* remains a classic on racial identity while his *Wretched of the Earth* foretold much that would happen in Independence movements as former colonies in the developing world demanded their independence. Zapata's short story "Un extraño bajo mi piel" ("A Stranger under My Skin") is a direct interpretation of Fanon's former work. Many of his novels, including *Changó* tangentially address the latter concern of liberation movements. Although Zapata did not write much directly in the field of psychiatry itself, this knowledge of the inner workings of the mind would clearly manifest itself in virtually all of his creative works. As such, his literary works contribute to the intellectual dialogue of what constitutes a definition of the self.

Throughout his long and productive career, Zapata championed the contributions of the powerless in their respective societies. His works insist on the tri-ethnicity of the characters⁷ who inhabit his fictional world and for the real-life citizens who populate the regions of his investigations. Specific points of focus have been the poor of all hues, the politically oppressed and black people within Colombia and in the entire Diaspora. While it is possible to read evidence of myriad themes in all manner of his works, the indisputable point of focus for the majority of

his writings remains that of black people.⁸ Not a contradiction between theory and practice, the spotlight that he increasingly reserves for people of African descent shows how he is capable of rendering concrete examples of the downtrodden, including those of African descent. His constant valorization of a black identity in his native Colombia, in Afro-Latin America, and indeed within the entire Diaspora prepared much of the groundwork for what we now know to be true in continental Latin America. (Captain-Hidalgo 1993, Prescott 2001, López 2007, Ortiz 2007). This is due to the fact that, at the time he began his observations, there were few voices advocating for a black presence in Latin America. Not only was it in the form of protest, but also in the form of celebration. His voicing of an Afro-Latin presence provides younger generations of scholars and activists with a firm footing from which to launch their contemporary concerns.

Recognition and Reception

Concrete results of his influence abound throughout the Diaspora. Many younger Afro-Latin writers speak of his influence. Among Spanish-speaking talents, one can think of the Afro-Costa Rican writer Quince Duncan and the Afro-Uruguayan writer Cristina Cabral to name two. In other languages, the list is equally impressive. For example, the great Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé discusses her gratitude to Zapata for shedding light on the color problem in Latin America:

In Latin America the whole society is based on color, with hatred and fear of Blacks. Everybody thinks he or she is descended from Whites and also from Indians, because it conveys an exotic touch. Blacks are totally removed from the picture. In reading the works of Manuel Zapata de Oliveia [sic], a Black Colombian writer, and in the course of conversations with him, I realized the dimensions of the color problem and the elimination of whatever is African and Negro from Latin American societies. (Pfaff 135)

Outside of academia, and in the early years of this decade, the Manuel Zapata Olivella Center came into being in Washington, D. C. Its stated aim is two-fold:

1. to provide educational opportunity, life skills, work-related capacity building, and leadership development to that part of the immigrant community in the Washington, DC metro area which is most disadvantaged; and
2. to lift up and celebrate the histories, cultures, and contribution of people of African descent to the societies of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States. (<http://www.freewebs.com/manuelzapataolivellacenter/12/2010>)

It is perhaps too early to measure concrete results for the Manuel Zapata Olivella Center, but the very fact of its existence provides a hint of what is to come in global recognition for the Afro-Colombian writer.

Diaspora scholarship in general and beyond Latin America is infinitely richer because of his contribution. This is true to the degree that to teach or even to read his novel *Changó* is to teach and read the Diaspora. Insisting on the need for the world to focus on this group in society, Zapata artfully chronicled the

presence of African Americans of all regions from before the arrival of the first slave ships through the twentieth century. In subsequent works like *Levántate, mulato*, his pointed references to other great epics were also an acknowledgement of how one should remember and teach the great history of black people in the Americas. For this same reason, global scholarship related to the whole of Latin America and regardless of the discipline, is rewarded with a fuller picture of the people and the ideas that constitute the region--provided that scholars take the time to read Manuel Zapata Olivella's work.

While knowledge of one or another area of his talent is growing, unfortunately, even now-- when one steps outside of the country-specific and ethnic group-focused writings of Colombia--Latin America's overall indebtedness to this great thinker and activist remains somewhat obscure. For example, even some who research the origins of black consciousness in Latin America somehow overlook his contributions to those significant developments in Latin American history.

A host of factors come into play when pondering why this lack of visibility persisted for so long. To begin with, one must think of Zapata as part of a larger Afro-Latin Diaspora. As such, two major issues make themselves evident: the lack of communication among Diaspora communities, until very recently; and the tardiness with which Latin Americanists of all disciplines, but particularly in the humanities, embraced the concept of an African Diaspora.

Until the 1990s there was no consistent means of communication among the various communities within the Afro-Latin Diaspora. It bears stating that, depending on which nations one wishes to include, twenty-five "countries" can make up the existence of Latin America with varying degrees of black presence in the twenty first century. This definition holds if one includes Puerto Rico even though it is a territory of the United States. It also encompasses French Guyana, Martinique and Guadeloupe, even though they are overseas provinces of France. Indeed, because of significant immigration from Latin America to the United States and to a lesser degree, Canada, it is possible to consider much of the Americas as part of Latin America and hence Afro-Latin America.

Due to the expense and logistics of communicating beyond one's national borders, the development of a region-wide dialogue among Afro-Latins tended to lag behind that in the world's top economies, except in the most extraordinary of circumstances. There have always been scholars, activists, and creative writers who have managed to bridge the gaps of communication. Zapata himself has been a shining example of this by seeking out his mentors and peers wherever they existed and finding them by any means necessary. However, Zapata was one of a sporadic few who had the will and the means to do so --even if the means was literally walking across continents and landing on the doorstep of one of his mentors. (Captain-Hidalgo 1993) The fact remains that long distance communication, particularly across national borders was incredibly difficult before the age of the Internet. This in turn made it difficult to consistently dialogue with Afro-Latins and other Diaspora communities even in neighboring countries. To a certain degree, this renders understandable the lack of references to Zapata outside of his native Colombia. Therefore, his specific global and regional achievements, like his

input into the Primer Congreso, are not as obvious to all. Thanks in large part to the greater accessibility to the latest in Internet and digital technology, lack of communication among Diaspora communities within and outside of Latin America is becoming an issue of the past.

With regard to Afro-Latin America in the larger scheme of Latin American scholarship, it is evident that the African Diaspora, of which Zapata remained a life-time "card-carrying member," remained "invisible" to all but those who were willing to accept the concept of a Diaspora in Latin America. Fields like anthropology and the broader Latin American studies have been more adept at embracing the idea of a current African Diaspora in Latin America. Literary departments continue to lag behind their counterparts in other fields. One notes important exceptions at universities with Africana studies departments as they are able to partner with colleagues in Spanish and Portuguese programs in order to remain current on the subject of the African Diaspora. There is a direct correlation between teaching the ideas of Manuel Zapata Olivella and the multi-disciplinarity of a university's programs. Fortunately, his works of all types are entering the classroom with greater frequency and with more depth to their treatment.

The Legacy of Zapata

Despite the slowness with which Manuel Zapata Olivella's name began to be recognized, the future augurs well for Zapata's place in world letters. Although global fame escaped him during his lifetime, Zapata's posthumous recognition and influence will not be denied. Within Colombia, specifically among members of the African Diaspora community, his intellectual legacy is strong. Many countries boast of their activist intellectual heroes and put forward those leaders to the world as the best that the nation has to offer. For example, just as Cuba has its Martí for those within and outside of the island; just as South Africa has its Mandela; similar to India's high regard for Mohandas Gandhi; just as black citizens of the United States have Martin Luther King, Afro-Colombians proudly showcase the life and works of Zapata. Not only does this speak well of Colombia's history of letters, it also highlights the new push among Afro-Latins to be recognized as an entity among themselves and across national borders. It is no wonder that Afro-Colombia is in the forefront of what just may prove to be a movement and not just a moment in social organization.⁹ In addition, beyond his native Colombia and within the discipline of Afro-Latin letters, Zapata is clearly one of the most analyzed and cited writers of African descent hailing from Latin America. These facts alone make obvious the significance of Zapata's intellectual legacy--a contribution that does not negate his creative side nor his activism.

Notes

- ¹ The prize is awarded only within one's lifetime and not posthumously.
- ² The "boom" of Latin American literature describes the phenomenon when permanent and wide-spread world recognition first came to Latin American writers. These were largely writers born in the 1930s whose new-narrative writings propelled them onto the international stage, garnering translations and multiple printings of their works. Among the many significant results of this boom of interest was the ability to live from their writings. This marked a clear difference with writers of previous generations, including that of Zapata, who needed to rely on other professional work in order to live. To this day, few if any Afro-Latin writers are among the fortunate who can live solely from the sale of their publications.
- ³ The English translation of the novel is *Changó, the Biggest Badass* by Jonathan Tittler, the noted Colombianist and translator of other works by Zapata.
- ⁴ This essay does not suggest that Zapata was the first to enter into the study of his people. He pays tribute to others like Rogelio Velásquez (Captain-Hidalgo 1993, 9; Henao). However, Zapata was able to expand the reach of all scholarship and interest related to black people in his country, not just the culture of Chocó which is the state from which Velásquez hails and which remains to this day the home to a sizable population of people of African descent.
- ⁵ For example, the López video in Zapata's own words and confirmed by others. (López, María Adelaida, Director. *Manuel Zapata Olivella, abridor de caminos*, 2007. <http://manuelzapataolivella.org/acerca-de/> 12/2010)
- ⁶ "Llegó un momento, en 1943, que hicimos la primera manifestación en Bogotá de la presencia africana organizando el día del negro. La mayoría eran estudiantes descendientes del Pacífico y los únicos que habíamos del Atlántico éramos Aquiles [Escalante] y yo. Gritábamos como unos locos, creyendo que en el año 2000 el África se iba a liberar."
- ⁷ The three ethnic groupings to which he constantly refers are Indian, white and black.
- ⁸ Even my undergraduate students are able to discern the difference between stated aims and practice. When making the choice of essay topics of Zapata's works like *Las claves mágicas*, students invariably point out this fact.
- ⁹ The idea of movements, like some other points raised in this essay, is part of a larger study on the subject of Afro-Latins. Regarding social movements, I draw on the work of Charles Tilly: *Social Movements, 1768-2004*. Boulder, Colorado, USA: Paradigm Publishers. 2004.

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