

## ¡Adelante, Afro-Colombia!

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During the past fifty years or so—that is, since about the decade of the 1960s—people of African descent in Colombia have been effecting major changes in the political, social, and cultural life of their communities. Despite increasing scholarship on Afro-Latin America, it is likely that many—if not most—citizens of the United States are unaware of the presence and plight of African peoples in Colombia and other nations of South America.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, few in the U.S. have probably not heard of the drug trafficking, guerrilla war, kidnappings, assassinations, and massacres that have plagued Colombia for decades. Many of the victims of these violent actions have been Afro-Colombians who have been struggling to live peacefully, to maintain their traditional way of life, and to hold on to their lands, too often coveted by greedy interlopers, short-sighted national leaders, and transnational companies. Moreover, contrary to the denials, Afro-Colombians have long faced racial discrimination and prejudice within their society. At the same time, however, in numerous ways—through their music, their art, their scholarship, and their literature—they have mounted steadfast resistance to these threats, affirming their legitimacy as members of the national community and their dignity as members of the human family.

The experiences of Afro-Colombians in these past decades bring to mind words written nearly ninety years ago by philosopher Alain Locke on the transformation that African Americans in the United States were undergoing during the period known as the New Negro (or Harlem) Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> In “The New Negro” Locke asserted that “the younger generation is vibrant with a new psychology; [and that] the new spirit is awake in the masses” (3). He observed that “the mind of the Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority.” In doing so, Locke continued, African Americans were “achieving something like a spiritual emancipation” (4). Moreover, he saw the change originating not from the African American leadership but rather from the masses, permeated as they were by a “transformed and transforming psychology” (7).

How is this “new psychology” among Afro-Colombian communities manifested? What accounts for it, or what events or circumstances may have helped bring it about? How have Afro-Colombians confronted the serious challenges to their livelihood, their culture, their existence? What steps have they taken to improve their lives?<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, since the independence period that led to the creation of Colombia as a nation state, Afro-Colombians individually and collectively have protested racial prejudice and racism, resisted injustice, and expressed black pride. Until the early 1970s, however, there does not seem to have existed among Afro-Colombians, a nation-wide black consciousness or a movement aimed at challenging the status quo and improving black lives. In that decade and afterwards, writings by Afro-Colombians on racial matters began appearing frequently in the national press and Afro-Colombians began to hold meetings, symposia and seminars on a national level that addressed their concerns and issues.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, Afro-Colombians created new organizations, such as the Movimiento Nacional CIMARRÓN, that worked to bring about political, educational, and cultural change on a national level.

Major concerns and strategies that Afro-Colombians emphasized seem to have been communication, organization, education, and culture. The first aimed at promoting dialogue among Afro-Colombian populations and breaking down barriers between them created by different historical experiences, mestizaje, and the country’s regionalism. The second aimed at uniting individuals and groups in common struggle for the purpose of raising political consciousness, promoting strong, positive racial identity, and increasing educational and professional opportunities. The third aimed at incorporating Afro-Colombians into the educational curricula so that all citizens could gain an accurate and broader understanding of the participation of Afro-Colombians in the nation’s history and of their important contributions to culture and society. The fourth aimed at strengthening and promoting Afro-Colombian culture—language, music, art, folklore, etc.—as a means of reevaluating and reinvigorating black lives and traditions.

The presidential candidacy in 1977 of medical doctor and writer Juan Zapata Olivella (“¡Pon color a tu voto!”), although unsuccessful, perhaps reflected the changing “Yes we can!” attitude of Afro-Colombians and evinced a push by Afro-Colombians for a greater voice and visibility in national politics. It also coincided with two other events: the celebration in Cali of the Primer Congreso de la Cultura Negra de las Américas, organized by writer and medical doctor Manuel Zapata Olivella and Brazilian activist and writer Abdias do Nascimento,<sup>5</sup> and the visit to Colombia of the first black Miss Universe, Janelle Commissiong of Trinidad and Tobago. Such happenings may well have inspired many Afro-Colombians with a new sense of confidence, purpose, and pride. The selection in 2001 of

Vanessa Mendoza as Miss Colombia marked the first time that an Afro-Colombian woman held the title.

While Afro-Colombians' own growing awareness of and responses to their historical dilemmas seems to be largely responsible for their transformation,<sup>6</sup> world events such as the decolonization of Africa and the civil rights movement in the United States probably influenced their thinking also. For example, the protest of African American athletes Tommy Smith and John Carlos at the Olympic Games in Mexico in 1968 and the persecution and prosecution of Angela Davis by the U.S. government (1970-1972), a *cause célèbre* for many, encouraged both revolutionary thinking and the wearing of hair in a natural or "Afro" style. Furthermore, travel of African Americans to Colombia and of Afro-Colombians to the U.S. fostered mutually beneficial dialogues and cultural exchanges that provided new perspectives and increased understanding of differences and similarities in common experiences and interests.

The appearance of new black-oriented journals, such as *Negritud*, founded in 1977 and published by the Movimiento de Cultura Negra (spearheaded by Amir Smith Córdoba and the Centro para la Investigación de la Cultura Negra), helped to promote and disseminate throughout the nation radical ideas and positive attitudes about blackness, as well as new approaches to raising racial consciousness and broadening the scope of black identity. With the founding of new organizations in the 1980s and 1990s came less ambitious but no less important periodicals such as *El Chasque* of La OBAPPO (Organización de Barrios Populares del Chocó).<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the publication of scores of books—both monographs and collections—in anthropology, history, sociology, linguistics, by Colombian and non-Colombian researchers, that focus on the history, conditions, and problems of black life and culture while also calling attention to the importance of their traditions and values—so often misunderstood and misinterpreted by the larger (white-mestizo) community—have given prominence to Afro-Colombian studies as a worthy area of scholarly inquiry on par with that of other ethnic groups<sup>8</sup>. These studies and essays, especially those written by young Afro-Colombians that challenged old ideas and stereotypes, provided a more realistic and balanced picture of Afro-Colombians, seeing them not as a problem but as a member of the national family,<sup>9</sup> and thus enhancing their sense of identity, belonging, and self esteem.<sup>10</sup>

The role of literature and creative writers should not be overlooked or underestimated. The publication in 1983 of Manuel Zapata Olivella's monumental saga *Changó el gran putas*, which took the author more than fifteen years to write, not only elevated historical African-descended Colombian figures such as Benkos Bhios, and José Prudencio Padilla to literary heights and re-created the history of African peoples in Colombia from a black perspective, but also, by shifting the story to different locales of the Americas (Haiti, Brazil, Mexico, United States), enabled Afro-Colombian and other

readers to see themselves within a broader context and as part of a larger, international diaspora of African peoples.

The year 1984 marked an important milestone in Afro-Colombian literary history as it was the centennial of the death of the poet Candelario Obeso (1849-1884). The occasion served to further stimulate Afro-Colombians' awareness of their history and contributions to the nation. Members of the Afro-Colombian literary and intellectual community as well as other writers, scholars, and community leaders organized or participated in symposia and other gatherings to pay homage to the poet and his achievements. Several articles in various newspapers and magazines, as well as a collection of essays devoted to the poet's life and writings (Smith Córdoba), appeared during the year. To commemorate the anniversary the federal government issued a stamp in Obeso's honor<sup>11</sup> and the following year (1985) the Instituto Caro y Cuervo published the book *Candelario Obeso y la iniciación de la poesía negra en Colombia* by Laurence Prescott.

With a few exceptions, Afro-Colombian writers have not attracted much serious attention from the country's critical establishment. Consequently, their works have often been unknown, ignored, or forgotten. With the publication in 2008 of the "Colección Presencia Afrocolombiana," consisting of six (mostly out-of-print) titles by six nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors,<sup>12</sup> earlier Afro-Colombian writers began to be rediscovered, reprinted, and reread.<sup>13</sup> In 2010 Colombia's Ministerio de Cultura produced the unprecedented "Biblioteca de Literatura Afrocolombiana," a nineteen-volume collection encompassing prose fiction (novels, short stories), poetry, drama, essays, chronicles, and oral literature by 15 individual authors and two anthologies of poetry by scores of authors, including the 58 Afro-Colombian women of the *Antología de mujeres poetas afrocolombianas* (vol. 16), many of whom have published at least one book of poetry.<sup>14</sup> The last volumen (19) contains a useful guide to the collection.

Perhaps the most significant change that occurred during these years was the writing of a new constitution in 1991 that officially recognized Afro-Colombians (*afrodescendientes*) as a legitimate ethnic group. The passage two years later (1993) of the Ley 70, or Ley de Negritudes, "granted land titles for the collective territories of Afro-Colombian communities"<sup>15</sup> and reserved for them two seats in the House of Representatives. According to leader Zulia Mena, however, this law also created a new problem since it only demanded of political aspirants that they take an oath that they are black (*negro*) without taking into account their place of origin or their work with the community.<sup>16</sup>

The Internet, social media—Facebook, YouTube, blogs—and other new technological advances have facilitated and fostered communication, organization, and education of and among Afro-Colombians throughout the republic. Thanks to the digitalization of old, out-of-print and otherwise inaccessible print media such as newspapers,

magazines, and books, scholars and students as well as the general reading public can become aware of, search, locate and access the literary and cultural productions of both older and new Afro-Colombian writers, artists, musicians, and others. Given the perennial problem of publicity, promotion, and distribution of Colombian books and journals, web sites such as Afrocolombia, Afrocolombianismos, etc., offer much information about living and deceased writers that may often be unavailable in major academic databases.

Afro-Colombians are not yet where they want to be or need to be to ensure the continuation of healthy, safe, and productive lives and the conservation of their lands, traditions, and values. Violence directed against Afro-Colombian

communities and the subsequent removal or uprooting of peoples from their traditional homelands, particularly in the Pacific coast but also in areas of the Atlantic coast, continue. At the same time, these acts have brought much needed international attention to the injustices and privations that these communities suffer, which has also led to international solidarity with their cause. This issue of *Revista de Estudios Colombianos* is testimony to the rich cultural heritage and historical struggle of Afro-Colombians and reflects the sustained interest (or commitment) of scholars living in Colombia, the United States, and elsewhere in uncovering and disseminating aspects of that heritage and struggle that may not be widely known.

### Notes

- 1 During the 1970s and 1980s *The New York Times* frequently carried articles on Blacks in Latin America that helped to inform the U.S. reading public about these often overlooked populations.
- 2 Alain Locke, "The New Negro," *The New Negro* (1925; New York: Atheneum, 1968) 3-16. It is interesting to note that Afro-Colombians, according to Carlos Rosero, have used the term "renaciente" to describe "un esfuerzo por darle un sentido político a nuestra vida, para vivirla mejor en Colombia" and to express "la conciencia que tienen los viejos del Pacífico de su origen y de que hay una conexión entre el allá de sus antepasados y el acá del presente, pero al mismo tiempo se da por supuesto que la gente es 'renaciente' aquí." See *El despertar de las comunidades afrocolombianas; relatos de cinco líderes: Dorina Hernández, Libia Grueso, Carlos Rosero, Marino Córdoba, Zulia Mena*, ed. María Inés Martínez (Houston: Editorial LACASA; San Juan, Puerto Rico: Centro de Investigaciones Sociales, 2012) 169. See the line "aquí volví a nacer" in Nancy Morejón's celebrated poem "Mujer negra."
- 3 Limitations of space here do not allow an in-depth review of the historical situation of Afro-Colombians. For a concise and useful summary, see Leslie B. Rout, Jr., *The African Experience in Spanish America, 1509 to the present day* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976) 236-249.
- 4 See, for example, Pbro. Herbert B. Valencia, "¿Hay discriminación racial en Colombia? Soy negro, gracias a Dios," *El Espectador* 11 Oct. 1970, Magazine Dominical: 7; "I Encuentro de Población Negra habrá en Cali," *El Tiempo* 6 Sept. 1974: 3; Alegre Levy, "Primer Congreso de Negros," *El Tiempo* 2 Nov. 1975: 1, 3.
- 5 On the occasion of the Congreso, Zapata Olivella published number 35 of his literary review *Letras Nacionales*, which was devoted exclusively to "El negro en la literatura colombiana," in effect making it the first anthology of Afro-Colombian writers to appear in print.
- 6 The publication in 1967 of Manuel Zapata Olivella's short story "Un extraño bajo mi piel," included in the author's collection *¿Quién dio el fusil a Oswald? y otros cuentos*, brought the complex of interrelated issues of internalized racism, *mestizaje*, alienation, self-hatred, and psychological liberation to the forefront of Afro-Colombian literature. In so doing, it marked an important contribution to the growing racial consciousness movement that developed during the turbulent decade of the 1960s.
- 7 Published in Quibdó and dated "Julio de 1992," numbers 2-3 of *El Chasque* focused on "Las familias organizadas de La Yesca: nuestra problemática y propuestas."
- 8 In this regard, publications by pioneering and dedicated anthropologists and historians, including Rogerio Velásquez, Aquiles Escalante, Nina de Friedemann, Jaime Arocha Rodríguez, Peter Wade, Adriana Maya, and Alexander Cifuentes, to name a few, are especially significant and valuable. See the Works Cited section for examples of their contributions.
- 9 I cannot help but think here of Langston Hughes' poem "I, Too," which begins "I, too, sing America. / I am the darker brother." Translations of the poem appeared often in Colombian periodicals since the 1920s. See Laurence E. Prescott, "'We, Too, Are America': Langston Hughes in Colombia," *The Langston Hughes Review* 20 (2006): 34-46.
- 10 See, for example, Jesús Lácides Mosquera, *El poder de la definición del negro* (Ibagué: Centro de Publicaciones y Ayudas Audiovisuales de la Universidad del Tolima, 1975); Ildefonso Gutiérrez Azopardo, *Historia del negro en Colombia ¿sumisión*

*o rebeldía?* (Bogotá: Editorial Nueva América, 1980); Juan de Dios Mosquera M., *Las comunidades negras de Colombia; pasado, presente, futuro*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Medellín: Editorial Lealon, 1986). Publications by Nina de Friedemann, Jaime Arocha, Alexander Cifuentes, and Peter Wade, to name a few, are essential reading. Although not focused exclusively on Afro-Colombia, Manuel Zapata Olivella's *El hombre colombiano* (Bogotá: Canal Ramírez-Antares, 1974) is worthy of mention here.

- 11 The following year (1985) the Instituto Caro y Cuervo published the book *Candelario Obeso y la iniciación de la poesía negra en Colombia*. I was pleased to have participated in the Homenaje to Obeso that took place in Mompós in July of 1984.
- 12 The authors and titles of the collection with original year of publication in parentheses are Manuel Baena, *Cómo se hace ingeniero un negro en Colombia* (1929); Francisco Botero, *Fruto de lucha* (1931); Juan Coronel, *Un peregrino* (1895); Eugenio Darío, *Mi hacha y tu cántaro* (1948); Carlos Arturo Truque, *Vivan los compañeros; cuentos completos* (2004?); and Rogério Velásquez, *Las memorias del odio* (1953).
- 13 Although not a man of letters, composer Petronio Álvarez Quintero (1914-1966), author of the famous “Mi Buenaventura,” has been ably profiled by his daughter. See Juana Francisca Álvarez Arboleda, *Vida y obra de un compositor: el maquinista trovador Petronio Álvarez Quintero “El Cuco”* (1997; Cali: Imprenta Departamental del Valle del Cauca, 2011).
- 14 I wish to acknowledge the generosity of the editors and authors of the collection for providing me with a copy during the 2010 Feria Internacional del Libro in Bogotá and I thank Professors Graciela Maglia and Carmen Millán de Benavides of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana for inviting me to participate in that memorable event.
- 15 Quotation taken from Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Colombia: Overview*, May 2008, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4954ce5dc.html> [accessed 11 September 2012].
- 16 See Yaned Ramírez, “Zulia, el emerger de las negritudes,” *El Tiempo* 27 marzo 1994: 6A. Although *afrodescendiente* has come into use recently in place of older and more common “racial” identifiers such as *negro*, *mulato*, and *zambo*, debate continues regarding the appropriate terminology with which to identify Afro-Colombian peoples and cultures. Similar debates among African Americans in the United States have a long history. See, for example, Lerone Bennett, Jr., “What’s In a Name? Negro vs. Afro-American vs. Black.”

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