
Lydia Cabrera. *Afro-Cuban Tales*. Trans. Alberto Hernandez-Chioldes and Lauren Yoder. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. 169p.

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Perhaps no major Latin American literary figure of the past century has been without translation into English as much as the Cuban fiction writer and anthropologist Lydia Cabrera. The reasons for the extremely erratic and fragmentary publication of her work in English are various. Cabrera was as much an anthropologist focused upon the African roots of Cuban religion and their musical and literary byproducts as she was a creative writer of fiction. In fact, these facets of her talent often blurred and blended in her many books, prompting recent critics to compare her to Zora Neale Hurston. Translators of Cabrera also have to contend with the fact that her characters sometimes use creolized dialects connected to esoteric or even extinct African languages. And as if these obstacles were not daunting enough, Cabrera's stories, blending traditional Cuban folklore motifs with her own inventions, possess a fluid and vertiginous range of illogical dramatic actions, sometimes difficult to follow, closer in spirit to Andre Breton's surrealism than Aristotle's poetics.

That said, this sole book of Cabrera's in English is a remarkably entertaining read and an essential read for lovers of contemporary Latin American fiction. It could be argued that the entire school of Latin American "Magic Realism" begins with Cabrera's *Afro-Cuban Tales*. These twenty-two stories are surrealistic fables where a woman marries a worm/man who later is replaced by bull who wants to banish the female gender in language ("Bregantino Bregantine") and where Tiger outsmarts Turtle ("Papa Turtle and Papa Tiger") in what sounds like a wry comedy about the ignorance of Cuba's Spanish colonizing class. One story finds the King of Spain visiting Cuba just to dance, suggesting that the colonizers knew they needed to "boogie on down" with their slaves. Essential to every fable is a phantasmagoric atmosphere that will seem familiar to readers of, say, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. But Cabrera's text reads quite differently from Marquez, and those of the Magic Realists writing many decades after Cabrera, because Cabrera's dream-like fictional atmosphere is clearly a magical fusion of traditional African (Yoruba and Congolese) spiritual symbols with the traditional elements of Latin American folk tales (the animal as trickster motif, for example). Think of the world of Aesop's Fables transplanted to Cuba in the 1930s by a woman in love with the poetry and painting emerging from French surrealism during that decade. In a noteworthy remark, Cabrera said: "I discovered the Cuba of my childhood on the banks of the Seine." She went from Cuba to France to become a painter. Failing at that, she became through self-education an anthropologist specializing in retentions of African cul-

ture in Cuban folk tales and music and a fiction writer of extraordinary imaginative range and psycho-spiritual, cross-cultural depth. She was a white Cuban woman in love with black Cuban folklore, a self-educated lesbian intellectual in a macho Latin society where male scholarship with an anti-African prejudice was the rule. Only now are many lovers of Latin American literature and culture catching up to her writing, making me think of her as Cuba's Gertrude Stein as much as a Cuban Zora Neale Hurston. It is hoped that *Afro-Cuban Tales*, her first book as well as her only book ever available in English translation will be followed by more of her books in translation. An academic publisher in the U.K. promised an English version of her masterpiece on Afro-Cuban religion, *El Monte*, for years, only to drop the project suddenly and mysteriously. So the University of Nebraska deserves credit for being the brave pioneer bringing Cabrera to readers of English.

If there is one flaw in this text, it is the fact that the two translators give no indication of the issues they faced in translating this daunting author. They also do not offer the context for Cabrera's art I am outlining in this review. Instead, the esteemed Cabrera scholar Isabel Castellanos, also a personal friend of Cabrera's until the author's death in 1991, touches lightly on a few translation issues. The book's other introduction, by the famous Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, Cabrera's mentor and brother-in-law, reflects the bias Ortiz had that Cabrera's stories were not really religious stories. This bias had everything to do with a deep racism in Ortiz made manifest in his writing, claiming the most African-influenced Cubans were in the criminal underworld. Cabrera held no such belief. And having the Ortiz preface to this book reprinted makes as much sense to me as having a new edition of Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* prefaced by a misguided Richard Wright review of Hurston's writing.

Readers could find their pleasure in this book enhanced by another aspect of Cabrera undeveloped in these two introductions. She was a superb ethnomusicologist who did field recordings of Cuban ritual music marked by African influences. Her recordings had languished in obscurity for decades until the Smithsonian/Folkways label recently reissued them as three CDs, with extensive scholarly booklets. The experience of reading *Afro-Cuban Tales* is infinitely enriched by hearing Cabrera's recordings, a project she did with her collaborating researcher Josefina Tarafa. They provide an uncanny soundtrack for reading these Cabrera tales since the rhythms of the music, Afro-Cuban drumming and singing, ripple through her writing even in English translation. ✱