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Students and scholars of Hispanic American literature have reasons to rejoice at the publication of Miriam DeCosta-Willis’s path-breaking anthology *Daughters of the Diaspora*. Simply put, this compilation of works by twenty Hispanophone women writers of African descent profoundly unsettles literary verities and impels us to rethink the field. And rightly so. For the first time in English translation, we find in a single volume a wealth of twentieth-century Afra-Hispanic poets, novelists and essayists hailing from Uruguay (Virginia Brindis de Salas, Beatriz Santos, Cristina Cabral), Ecuador (Argentina Chiriboga), Costa Rica (Eulalia Bernard, Shirley Campbell), Colombia (Edelma Zapata Pérez, Yvonne-América Truque), Cuba (Marta Rojas, Georgina Herrera, Lourdes Casal, Nancy Morejón, Excilia Saldaña, Soleida Ríos), Puerto Rico (Carmen Colón Pellot, Julia de Burgos, Mayra Santos-Febres), the Dominican Republic (Aida Cartagena Portalatín, Sherezada “Chiqui” Vicioso), and Equatorial Guinea (María Nsue Angüe). The twenty writers featured in this book help us to map out a distinctly black and womanist creative terrain. A short biography and a scholarly essay accompany each author. The

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interpretive essays, alone, by the fifteen noted scholars gathered here—Marvin A. Lewis, Caroll Mills Young, Claudette Williams, and Ian I. Smart, to name a few—would make this a very useful book for specialists, generalists and graduate students alike. With the exception of Carmen Colón Pellot, all entries also include a photograph of the author, an important detail given the complex phenotypical rules that guide racial identification in Hispano-American countries.

The anthology opens with a thought-provoking essay by editor DeCosta-Willis providing us with an historical and conceptual framework for this emerging body of works. The growing corpus evidenced here demands the attention of critics within the countries represented, as well as that of Latin Americanists and scholars of the Black Atlantic. Consequently, one of De Costa-Willis’s aims is to promote the study of new writers together with more established voices and older writers currently out of print. Afra-Hispanic writers have encountered great hardships in the diffusion and appreciation of their writings, with the important exceptions of Nancy Morejón and Mayra Santos-Febres. The author reminds us that even as black diaspora writers have received more attention, many still face difficulties finding national and international publishers, and attracting critical attention and a reading public that would nurture their careers. Additionally some of the women featured here, although in the main university educated, have had to support themselves outside their craft as cultural activists and in other creative endeavors.

Thirteen out of the twenty authors are poets steeped in the tradition of poetry as performance art. As DeCosta-Willis explains, these authors make intelligent use of “free verse with its multiple rhythms and tempos but also traditional, primarily Hispanic, verse forms, such as baladas, romances, sonetos, sones, tangos, cantos, elegías, and elogios” (p. xx). We find some parallels here with the performative traditions of African-American writers in the United States, especially those of the Black Arts movement, who merged popular artistic musical forms with a pan-African ethos, embracing,
among other things, the persona of the writer as griot.

Afra-Hispanic writers, like Costa Rica’s Eulalia Bernard and Shirley Campbell, Uruguay’s Beatriz Santos and Cristina Cabral, Cuba’s Nancy Morejón, and Puerto Rico’s Mayra Santos-Febres, provide a polemical counter-thesis to the negrista paradigm put in place in the 1930s. Following in the footsteps of Virgina Brindis de Salas and her poetry of black affirmation, they deconstruct the philosophical and aesthetic traps of negrismo. This is a constant in the works featured in Daughters of the Diaspora, and in this regard, as in other areas of their production, the authors show tremendous lucidity and inventiveness. Praise songs are used to underscore the humanity, not just the curves, of the black female body; the drum calls for pan-African unity against oppression, not for the mere bacchanal. Pointedly, depth of connection and an understanding of the black experience replace the voyeuristic superficiality that Euro-Latin American male authors had ascribed to the travails and triumphs of people of African descent in the Americas.

Black pride informs the works of virtually all the writers in this collection as they echo Costa Rican Shirley Campbell’s sentiments “I accept myself / unequivocally free / unequivocally black / unequivocally beautiful.” Given the long histories of Euro-centrism in the Caribbean and Latin America among many within the Creole intelligentsia and in official circles, black and mulatta writers testify to the difficulties in creating a self-aware standpoint from which to speak. Here again we see the great value of DeCosta-Willis’s anthology. She presents the plurality of voices and positions that grapple with long-standing ideologies of mestizaje and the problem of internalized racism. The case of Puerto Rican Carmen Colón Pellot is quite instructive in this respect. Her Ámbar mulato (1938) exemplifies the cruel crisis of identity of a mulatta living in the midst of Puerto-Rican-style white supremacy. In the penetrating critical essay that accompanies Colón Pellot’s selection, Claudette Williams examines the mulatto denial of blackness that leads to the racial erasure of all women of African descent. Yet there are other possible readings, as
Gladys Jiménez Muñoz (2005:73-93) proposes in her recent essay on Colón Pellot’s poetry. Read as a pointed response to Luis Palés Matos, this poetry could be seen as resisting his (white) Creole appropriation of Afro-Puerto Ricanness. Not only is Colón Pellot correcting Palés Matos’s one-sided view of the black experience, she is also responding to the racist hierarchy of worth that privileges the white female body. I bring up this other interpretation of Colón Pellot not to undermine, but rather to underscore the tremendous importance of *Daughters of the Diaspora*. By providing us with a rich selection of texts and accompanying critiques we realize that we are dealing with a coherent corpus and a complex tradition. We should not underestimate the impact of reading all these diverse and nuanced women writers in close succession. As it turns out, “the subaltern” speaks, and critics of Latin American literature would be advised to listen. I recently used this text in a course I teach on Latin American women writers to great effect. Students were challenged to rethink the very concept of the representative author and the criteria that support the present parameters of the literary canon.

The 1980s and 1990s also saw the publication of the first novels by Afra-Hispanic women: Aida Cartagena Portalatín’s *Escalera para Electra* (1980), María Nsue Angüe’s *Ekomo* (1985), Luz Argentina Chiriboga’s *Bajo la piel de los tambores* (1991), Marta Rojas’s *El columpio del rey Spencer* (1993), and Mayra Santos-Febres’s *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000). It is quite instructive to read *Daughters of the Diaspora* in conversation with Maria Luisa Bombal, Luisa Valenzuela, Rosario Ferré, Elena Poniatowska, Cristina Peri Rossi, and Isabel Allende. Notions of gender identity and body politics, political repression and historical memory, horizons of genre and of reader expectations, linguistic experimentation, among other things, can provide launching points for much needed debates in the field. As is the case with Latin American writers of European descent, many of these authors have also published collections of short stories and essays on diverse social, cultural, and literary topics. Furthermore,
Afra-Hispanic writers tackle gender identity and sexuality as one of the keys to self-knowledge while eschewing the “feminist” label as a Euro-American ideology. Here, too, we could ponder whether this is a version of the womanist/feminist debate or something else entirely. As DeCosta-Willis concludes:

In spite of such disclaimers, there is a decided feminist consciousness in the works of many contemporary Afra-Hispanic writers, who create strong and independent female characters; rewrite national history through their portraits of revolutionary women; describe grandmothers, othermothers, and literary foremothers who have shaped their work; support a female culture of artists and workers; examine women’s inner worlds (their psychology and spirituality); underscore in their lives and works the importance of female deities such as Yemayá, Ochún, and Oya; write an ‘autobiography of the body’ that explores sexual desire and the female body; question femininity and women’s traditional roles in patriarchal societies; examine the effect that silence, isolation, and invisibility have on female agency and creativity; and expose both private and public acts of violence and discrimination against women (p. xxv).

It is small wonder then that the paradigmatic dancing mulatta of negristra poetry is put to rest once and for all in favor of “the new black woman,” the “Mujer batalla.” Moreover, erotically charged language and an openness regarding sexual desire is reappropriated to serve female ends, as we see in the works of Uruguayan Beatriz Santos, Cuban Marta Rojas, and Puerto Rican Mayra Santos-Febres, among others. Nevertheless, one issue still to emerge in this rich body of works is the question of heteronormativity. With the exception of Santos Febres’ bestseller Sirena Selena, a novel whose characters inhabit the socially transgressive space of transgendered femininity, we are hard-pressed to find explorations of love and sex outside the male/female dyad. Could some of the writings by the Afra-Hispanic women included in this anthology, and elsewhere, be read through a lesbian feminist, or more broadly, a “queer” sensitivity? What possibilities exist for an exploration of different sexualities in the works of these writers?
While these and other related questions await future examination, the comprehensive tasks of recovery and elucidation of the black Latin American experience have been brilliantly furthered with this book. Miriam DeCosta-Willis’s timely anthology reaffirms her role as a pioneer in African Diaspora studies. *Daughters of the Diaspora* is indispensable.

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**References**


**Note**

1 Perhaps further research on Colón Pellot will yield photographs of her. She died in the United States and very little is known of her last years.