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The book’s front cover, a reproduction of the nineteenth-century French painter and engraver Frédéric Mialhe’s *Fiesta de reyes*, gets it right. By that I mean—and this becomes incandescently clear on finishing reading Rafael Ocasio’s 2012 study, *Afro-Cuban Costumbrismo: From Plantation to the Slums*, his fourth book—when you consider that the cover designer chose not to include Mialhe’s engraving in its entirety. Instead, the cover centers on two dancing barefoot *ngangas* (healers, holy men), their bodies clothed in ceremonial African garb, one looking face down and shaking a lavish peacock headdress, the other staring straight at you and donning a horned crown of fiery red plumes; yet both (along with the bongo beating away) conducting a group of chanting *santeros* and *santeras* in the background. Dressed solely in white, the men in open loose shirts exposing their muscular chests, and the women in elaborate skirts almost touching the ground but tight around the waist, so that the skirts balloon to the rhythm of gyrating hips, reveals a *fiesta* like no other. The celebrants stomp their feet, with arms and hands raised in a show of solidarity and respect to the ancestral spirits.

A little barking dog in the lower left-hand corner also figures on the cover, but the *calesero*, the liveried black stagecoach driver, the “uppy Black” (Ocasio 11), *respectable* and holding a cane, decked out in top hat and swallow-tail coat, doesn’t. Why? Well, for one, the *calesero* strikes a static pose, two-dimensional like a Russian Orthodox Church icon of the Virgin and Divine Child amidst the tremendous movement of the festivity, the *bembe* Ocasio himself affectionately alludes to in his preface of dancing chanting holy men and stomping singing *santeros* and *santeras* (xvi). Unlike the *congero*, who too is absent from the cover, but who nonetheless makes his presence felt as all the worshippers swing and sway to the beating of his intense drumming—skin against skin—the *calesero’s* “civilized” albeit colonized and blunt stamp on the whole scene serves as a figurative contrapuntal wall the dancers push off of, in an attempt to prove that, though of African ancestry, the stagecoach driver is indeed their counterpart. And Ocasio’s book dexterously unravels these contrapuntal intricacies and how these go about developing an Afro-Cuban identity soon to evolve into a Cuban nationalist spirit.
The detail and rigor with which Ocasio maps the discursive history of nineteenth-century *Costumbrista* writing hinges on a paradox, one that he uses as an exegetical conceit. To better explain, I turn to Ocasio and what he proposes towards the closing of *Costumbrismo*: “[i]n spite of the individual Costumbrista writer’s biases [and these often invariably negative, derogatory, and downright racist] about Black Creole cultures, their essays exhibit numerous literary figures as examples of urban Black traditions” (205). Then, after listing some of those figures like “the mulatos finos, the female Black vendor, the snappy-dresser coach driver, and the colorful and dangerous Black thug,” he concludes: “[a]s illustrated in their counterparts in today’s multiracial and multinational societies, these Black types reveal elements of the dynamics behind race relations and the impact of racial discrimination on behavioral patterns” (207, emphasis added). That very “impact of racial discrimination on behavioral patterns,” such as *Costumbrista* writers like Anselmo Suárez y Romero, Cirilo Villaverde and Miguel Tácón either overlooking the fact people of African culture and ancestry are endowed with great spiritual mettle and possess a history the world could learn from, and thus portray them prejudicially in their articles, or simply maliciously degrading them in otherwise racist diatribes, stating they are subhuman, could be “opinions” more sensible, compassionate twenty-first century minds certainly won’t agree with.

The point is, and this is what Ocasio continually signposts throughout *Costumbrismo*, in an elegant, clear, and well-documented style even the most diligent scholars would envy, that *Costumbrista* writers were the first to depict Black Creole culture to a mainstream audience, in a literature geared towards satisfying the needs of a consumer society. Subsuming, and subsumed by, what is inextricably Cuban, Afro-Cuban culture, on being represented through personages like *el negrito catedrático, el cimarrón, los mataperros, el curro, la bruja,* and *el pregonero,* “shadow characters” just to name a few (Ocasio 59), becomes the catalyst prompting a unique yet multifaceted Cuban national spirit. Ocasio goes beyond merely saying that all these people lumped together on an island qualifies as syncretism, but uses the person who he is as a proving ground of sorts, wherein he will explore “the development of hybrid elements of Black cultures in Cuban and, by extension, in Caribbean national identities” (xi). For, he “too struggle[s] to find a middle point between [his] desire to project an image of professionalism acceptable within academia and to enjoy marginal roots as a mulato fino” (xvii).

The book, as a literary architecture and academic work, paradoxically follows a decolonizing structure *à la wa Thiong’o*, in that its intro, five chapters, and conclusion mirror “the Yoruba practice of Santería” in “[t]he siete potencias’ [the Seven African Powers]…formed by ‘Eleggúa

Excluding, of course, the “Preface: A Mulato Fino in the Twenty-First Century—A Personal Reflection,” serving as a prayer, a sign of respect and humility towards the Orishas and a request to approach, the book burns like a lit candle to the Seven African Powers, the kaleidoscope of colors fading one by one to the end.

By the time the reader arrives to Ocasio’s conclusion, two arguments remain salient in his/her mind: (one) “Racist stands are slow to die” (53); and (two) “Whether because of the secrecy of the Black Creole religious groups...or because Black belief, systems were considered a backward example of the current state of development of Cuban culture struggling with technological advances available on the island because of international investors in the sugarcane market, few Costumbrista articles explored Black religious subjects as a central theme” (199). The first I read as Ocasio living vicariously through Juan Francisco Manzano, and the redemptive albeit ethnically/culturally compromising aspects of writing in Manzano’s case, and investigative study in Ocasio’s. On the one hand, Manzano as a mulato fino refutes the damaging stereotypical value judgements of the dominating discourse—mainly, that blacks are inferior to whites—by teaching himself how to read and write in Spanish, becoming not only a memoirist but a poet as well (62). And on the other, Manzano giving in and describing himself in racial slurs, thus amplifying the self-hate (79), shows Ocasio fleshing out those “shadow characters,” those “peripheral figures” like Manzano (59, 129), in a manner empathic with the abolitionist cause, but with enough objectivity suggesting that, similar to the dramatic changes Cuba itself is currently undergoing, psychological portraits like Manzano’s are also subject to this notion of “a developing Cubanía” (131). And this ever mutable, ever mutating Cuban-ness equals to, Ocasio appears to be saying, the Cuban National Spirit.

The second I read—feel, really, in my bones—as the “corporeally” absent congero of the Fiesta de reyes cover. That though he or his bongo are nowhere to be found, the reader turned celebrant of Ocasio’s study
need only look towards the congregation, both pictorial and exegetical, to know that his energy, the sonic vibrations emanating from his drumming, in being purely numinous, possesses the greatest impact in the phenomenological world; a power curing physical and spiritual wounds, uniting sentiments between divided peoples, and informing that no one is as broken or defeated as they think they are, much less for how an oppressor requires them to be. For this reason, “few Costumbrista articles explored Black religious subjects as a central theme” (199). Costumbrista writers were savvy like that, and Ocasio in a lucid style that is rigorous, but above all patient, dimensions these antagonisms with an exuberance always controlled in sound, levelheaded, and well-reasoned prose. Overall, do yourself a favor, and read this book.


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An Indo-Trinidadian scholar of West Indian topics and the diasporic phenomenon, Kumar Mahabir, has collected a manifold of provocative essays in his most recent book, Caribbean Issues in the Indian Diaspora. Said papers resulted from the proceedings of the conferences held at St. Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies in Trinidad in 2011. The book is very aptly divided into four sections and adequately subtitled according to their converging themes: Emotions in Migration, Assimilation, Plurality of Identities and Social Adaptations and Reproduction. A total of fifteen essays comprise the bulk of the book.

Each essay attempts to fill the gaps of historical value and thus provide answers to what remained unaccounted for regarding the East Indian diasporic movement. Maurits S. Hassankham’s contribution addresses the emotional state of the migrants and those who remained in the motherland. It is common knowledge by now that Indians who migrated did so temporarily to earn sufficient funds in the foreign countries to send back home, but it was generally their heart’s desire to return to India. However, the majority rarely managed to do so. Quite the contrary, many died before they could amass sufficient money to defray