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REVIEW

Montero, Óscar J. *Azares de lo cubano. Lecturas al margen de la nación*. Almenara, 2022.

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Azares de lo cubano illuminates the suppressed voices that shape Cuba's national narrative, opening the way to a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of identity. Analyzing Luisa Pérez de Zambrana's elegies, the encounter between Julián del Casal and Antonio Maceo, Rafael Serra's antiracist writings, and José Martí's diary, Montero centers writers excluded from the "official" discourse of Cubanness epitomized by Cintio Vitier's lectures given at the Lyceum between October and December of 1957 and later published as *Lo cubano en la poesía* (1958). Anti-essentialist in its form and content, Montero's study models a reading that neutralizes the hold of a hegemonic concept of nation.

One of the most compelling and distinctive features of the book is its interweaving of memoir and close reading. *Azares* opens with "Preámbulo cienfueguero," the author's recollection of walking the streets of Cienfuegos where an old man yells a homophobic slur (9). Montero describes the scene as "la manifestación callejera de lo cubano," an essence sustained by prejudices and exclusions (11). The author's wish to disrupt oppressive constructs of nation sets the book in motion, but the scene is notable also for its portrayal of the author as an itinerant subject whose "brújula desvencijada" charts an uncertain path traversing Cuba's 19th century and his own present (9). Montero studies *lo cubano* at the intersections of race, gender and sexuality, exposing both the fundamental and foundational role of marginalized writers like Zambrana, Casal, and Serra, and the contradictions and possibilities of an iconic text of Cuba's national story: Martí's diary. It is this ambulant reading that makes Oscar Montero's *Azares de lo cubano* such a provocative and indispensable study of what it means to be Cuban.

An aside about Arcadio Díaz Quiñones's *Cintio Vitier. La memoria integradora* (1987) and the polemic that followed its publication further orient Montero's study. If Vitier's *lo cubano* resonates with Díaz Quiñones because it posits poetry as a way of knowing the nation, the author recognizes the perils of theorizing a national culture in terms of essences that "minimize internal historic, social and racial differences," thus precluding "the real integration of the heterogeneity and difference of a plural and conflictive society" (17, my translation). Montero's title announces these less harmonious and more human vicissitudes of Cuba's becoming, *azares* signifying both misfortunes and happy accidents of fate. This indeterminacy is deliberate, and Montero's study does not resolve the paradoxes of Cuba's national culture. Calling to mind Theodore Roethke's "The Waking," Montero's "shaky compass" elucidates a steadying and restorative interpretation of Cubanness in its advocacy for an open and flexible concept of identity.

Chapter one, "Elegías osiánicas. Luisa Pérez de Zambrana," is an affecting and richly layered analysis that reframes Zambrana's poetry beyond the sexist prejudices and Romantic clichés that cement her exclusion from the national conscience in Vitier's *Lo cubano en la poesía*. Montero elucidates the intellectual heft of Zambrana's poetry by centering her dialogue with Macpherson's Ossianic elegies, an aspect of her work disregarded by Vitier and others. Religious interpretations of the elegy to her husband, "La vuelta al bosque" (1868), overlook the daring eroticism of their imagined reunion in which the pulsating natural landscape replicates the couple's passion. Channeling Ossian –the alleged author of a series of ancient Gaelic texts translated and published by the Scottish poet James Macpherson (1736-1796)– Zambrana evokes her deceased husband and five children against the misty, moody scenes of a hidden underworld, in which the lyrical "I" finds solace in communion with the Celtic bard. Her grief, which is rendered through visionary poetic landscapes and cathartic dialogue with Macpherson's Ossian, transforms Zambrana's lyrical subjects into dynamic, wandering and shadowlike beings, containing "other voices" and contradicting static notions of the Romantic lyrical "I" (28). In this way, Montero argues, Zambrana's poems surpass the *ubi sunt* and lamentation characteristic of the Romantic elegy: her sentimentalism

blurs the boundaries between life and death, presencing her lost loved ones. The chapter's most significant insight, however, is showing how Zambrana elegizes a universal loss that is germane to the feeling of expatriation registered in the book's epitaph by Albert Camus ("There are no more islands, and yet we feel their desire"), suggesting that Zambrana's poems are also a source of healing for the bereft citizens of a lost island.

In the second chapter, "Cicatrices. Julián del Casal y Antonio Maceo," Montero turns his attention to the encounter between the venerated hero of Cuba's independence movement, and the ostracized poet. Their meeting takes place at a *tertulia* in the Hotel Inglaterra, where Maceo shows his battle scars. Casal and Maceo would have shaken hands, imagines Montero, and this thought propels a careful and compelling analysis of how critical constructs have distorted both figures, diminishing Maceo's intellectual acumen and Casal's national conscience. Statues of the "Bronze Titan" emblematize Maceo as a strong and virile but one-dimensional warrior, illustrating how the establishment promoted a fixed concept of national identity. Montero argues that the way Maceo is remembered forecloses a deeper understanding of this dynamic hero and "visionary cultural agent" (48). In his letters, for example, Maceo recounts the discrimination he faced as an Afro-Cuban general and affirms his proud Black identity, offering a more nuanced view of his role as a leader in the independence struggle (48). Touching hands with his foil, Casal, whose personality was at odds with the heteronormative constructs of nation that equated patriotism with vigor, stimulates a reappraisal of both figures beyond the binaries of arms and letters, action and evasion, virility and impotence. Montero shows how Casal's chronicles are themselves powerful acts of resistance, laying bare the paradoxes of *fin de siècle* society where industrial progress, the avid consumption of European imports, and abject poverty coexisted. Casal critiques an economy "that already points to the exclusions of contemporary globalization," shoring up his identity as a separatist and prescient Cuban thinker (56). The major revelation of the chapter, though, is that "toxic mechanisms of exclusion still operate" through acts of cultural gatekeeping. Casal's scars are internal (visible in his writing), whereas Maceo's are external (written on the body); both undermine the concept of a unified nation by affirming identities excluded or neutralized by those in power. Together, Maceo and Casal anticipate the ills that will plague the Republic and illuminate a path toward an inclusive cultural identity founded on the "both/and" rather than the "either/or," a redemptive discourse symbolized by their fraternal handshake.

Race remains a central theme throughout the book, and chapter three evinces the more insidious reality of Martí's ideal, deployed by Whites in power in order to suppress civil rights efforts and accuse Black Cubans of being racist themselves (cf. Helg). In "De niño yo vi. Rafael Serra," Montero reframes the ambiguities of Serra's antiracism in dialogue with his compatriots Juan Gualberto Gómez and Evaristo Estenoz as well as prominent leaders in the African American community including Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, showing how Black intellectuals navigated a perilous landscape predicated on a tenuous racial harmony in their fight for full citizenship. Serra's antiracist protest parallels the struggle for independence including the aspiration of national unity (and its implicit racism). Like the Afro-Cuban poet, José Manuel Poveda (1888-1926), Serra risked a more overt and openly critical "I" in the subjective territory of poetry. The chapter's title is an allusion to "A Cuba," in which Serra's lyrical "I" witnesses the horrors of racial injustice. This self-presentation contrasts with the tactics of self-erasure, including euphemistic and metonymic references to race, that characterize Serra's prose. Montero means for us to understand the necessary ambiguity and paradox of Serra's antiracism in this context: "a more visible African cultural legacy can't be part of the strategy of Black intellectuals" facing racist violence (79). Montero's key point is that Serra's works are not artifacts of

an era that has been overcome but texts "capable of dialoguing with our [current] prejudices" (83).

In "Yo, en un rincón. José Martí," the longest and most challenging chapter of his book, Montero asks whether the apostle can redeem us one again. Montero argues that the marble statues and ritualized acts that immortalize Martí paper over a dynamic, multi-faceted, and fragmented subject whose two-part diary reveals a more plural concept of Cuban national culture. Using self-effacing and self-erasing tactics, Martí's diary elevates the voices of everyday residents from the Dominican and Haitian towns that he passes through on his campaign to Dos Ríos. Notable examples include the "loquacious barber" whose repudiation of a fixed national origin ripples and resurfaces in Martí's own doubts concerning the ideals of national unity and racial harmony. Montero deftly analyzes diaries, letters, journalism, and political manifestos to elucidate Martí's wide-ranging registers and styles, evidence of both his pragmatism and the contradictions of his personality. In part 2, rather than recounting Martí's heroic deeds, Montero centers scenes that expose the inequality and divisiveness marring society, and details the racism of liberation army leaders who relegated Afro-Cuban freedom fighters like Quintín Banderas, and even Maceo, during and after the campaign. Martí does not nuance these testimonies but makes space for citizens like Narciso Moncada to speak for themselves: "le digo que en Cuba hay una división horrorosa" (113). Uncovering the multi-voiced discourses of Martí's diary, Montero disrupts the mechanisms of exclusion and oppression that underwrite monolithic narratives constructed on the ideals of unity and racial harmony. The significance of the chapter rests on Montero's contrapuntal reading of the diary's two parts, exposing the paradoxes of a foundational document that at the same time questions the limits of the nation.

Montero's epilogue returns to Cruces, between Cienfuegos and Santa Clara, a "place of history" where streets are named after major historical figures, including Dr. Juan G. Camero. Walking through the city once again, Montero reprises an anecdote about Camero's son and the open secret of his homosexuality. Juanito's status as town doctor who provided free care to his patients insulates him from the ostracism he might have faced, were it not for his venerated position in society. Montero argues that Juanito's custom of sitting on the porch issued a challenge to passersby, compelling them to wave to him, thus becoming complicit in the performance of his sexuality. Like Juanito, the figures that Montero analyzes in *Azares de lo cubano* embody besieged, fragmented and multifarious subjectivities that resist assimilation into a monolithic narrative of national culture. Honing in on borders, thresholds and doorways, Montero's indispensable study is an act of restorative justice that reckons with the prejudices of *lo cubano* through a plural and inclusive discourse that expresses what it means to be Cuban from the in-between spaces, making it a fundamental reference for scholars of race, gender and nation in Latin America and the Caribbean.