

Haiti and Post-Colonial Allegory in  
Manuel Zapata Olivella's *Changó, el gran putas*

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One hundred and eighty years subsequent to the liberation of Saint-Domingue from French-colonial rule in 1803, Afro-Colombian writer, folklorist and dean of Afro-Hispanism Manuel Olivella published his mammoth *Changó, el gran putas*. To-date, this particular work has been the subject of countless published articles and monographs, scholarly presentations and consideration for literary prizes. In continuing the discussion on this text, my paper purposes to offer a critical analysis of Manuel Zapata Olivella's *Changó*, from the position of re-imagining Haiti and re-positioning the Haitian Revolution through the gaze of post-colonial allegory. In so doing, I will offer post-modern and post-colonial implications as a transition to discussing allegorical elements in the novel. Second, I will highlight textual examples that illustrate how the author narratively treats the historical moments of the Haitian Independence and the Revolution. The examples mentioned then seek to substantiate my position of post-colonial allegory as the vehicle by which Manuel Zapata Olivella explores the history of Haiti and the Revolution within the text. Finally, I will offer concluding comments regarding the discursive qualities of the work evidenced by the author's mastery of the craft of fiction writing.

In *Manuel Zapata Olivella and the "Darkening" of Latin American Literature* (2005), I argue that *Changó el gran putas*, engages the readership in an exploration of postmodernist discourse from the standpoint of the African Diaspora through the use of metafiction as a predominant strategy. To undergird my assertions, Linda Hutcheon's work on postmodernity and Raymond William's critical insights on postmodernity in Colombia serve as the theoretical framework and provide substantive clarifications. It

was stated that by situating the postmodernist approach to literature between two polar thoughts or philosophies: that of John Barth and Charles Newman, common denominators used to define postmodernism were identified. In terms of literature, these common characteristics include self-consciousness, historiographic metafiction, irony, parody and subversion. In addition, Hutcheon links postmodernist thought to certain epistemological ideologies such as capitalism, imperialism, Marxism, feminism and postcolonialism. However, a most salient point raised by Hutcheon, for the purpose of this discussion, is her view that the postmodern is "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political," (Hutcheon, 3) which enables a "rethinking of history" in terms of the representation of a singular truth arguing that there in lies implicit "truths."

Postmodern theory, with its emphasis on ideological factors (such as imperialism), intersects with many other contemporary critical theories, one of which is postcolonialism. In its simplest understanding, the post-colonial chronologically evokes the epoch subsequent to the abolition of colonial rule. However, literary critics since the 1970s have broadened the scope of this terminology in order to encompass the wide-range of experiences in societies that were formerly European colonies. In more contemporary times, the term postcolonial resonates the political, social and economic institutions of former Imperial colonies and the psychological implications on its post-colonial subjects. Postcolonial issues of race, ethnicity, exploitation, oppression, racism, social struggle, resistance, and ethnic composition emerge as the predominant thematic focus in many works by Manuel Zapata Olivella, *Changó* being among them.

In light of its intricate postmodern narrative structure and the centering of post-colonial themes, *Changó* continues to receive critical attention from literary critics and scholars. For many, this is Zapata Olivella's "obra maestra." For an overwhelming majority, *Changó* represents the culmination of the author's discourse on the African Diaspora. Consuming over twenty years of the author's creative effort, this novel

emerges as a mythological construction of the African Diaspora in the Americas and beyond. The major thread that unites all of its novelistic sections is Africa and the Yoruba religious tradition.

With regard to allegory, the editors of *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* suggest that allegory

is a 'symbolic narrative' in which the major features of the movement of the narrative are all held to refer symbolically to some action or situation...

..., a 'post-colonial' allegory contests and disrupts the narrative assumptions of colonialism, such as the inevitability of 'development', of 'progress', of 'civilization', the dominance of chronological view of history, the Euro-centric view of the 'real'. By reinforcing the fact that 'real' events occupy various horizons of meaning, post-colonial allegory becomes a common strategy of resistance in post-colonial texts. (Ashcroft et al., 9-11)

In relation of Manuel Zapata Olivella's *Changó*, the symbolic allegorical representations refer to the historical movements highlighted in the third part of the novel, which seek to re-imagine Haiti and re-position the Revolution from the vantage point of the post-colonial. By the use of terminology such as re-imagining and re-positioning, I beg the notion that through post-colonial allegory, Manuel Zapata Olivella, creates a counter-discourse with regard to the official history of Haiti as the first Black nation-state in the Western Hemisphere and situates the Revolution as the template for global Black struggle, particularly in the Americas. Furthermore, Euro-centric view of the "real" as it relates to divulging history, is subverted. For these purposes, post-colonial allegory offers a viable paradigm for textual analysis.

As a point of departure, it is important to understand the significance of the divine figure used as a unifying agent in the novel. The African deity Changó (Xangó or Sangó)

is the son of Yemayá and Orungán who gave birth to fourteen of the most compelling gods of the Yoruba faith. As an addendum to the work itself, Zapata Olivella provides a lengthy “cuaderno de bitácora” (binnacle notebook) that serves as a compass for navigating the text’s mythology. Within this notebook, Changó is described thus:

En la mitología yoruba, hijo de  
Yemayá and Orungán. Fue el tercer  
soberano del estado imperial de Oyo,  
cuyo capital, Ife, ubicada en las  
cercanías del Níger, fue cuna de  
los Orichas creadores del mundo.  
La vida y hazañas de Changó se  
confunden en la mitología de Africa  
y América donde se le venera como al  
Dios de la guerra, la fecundidad y  
la danza. En la sincretización con  
los santos católicos se le identifica  
con Santa Bárbara. (Zapata Olivella, 735)

(In the Yoruba mythology, imperial son  
of Oyo, whose capital, Ife, situated in  
the vicinity of the Niger, was the birth-  
place of the Orichas, creators of the  
world. The life and adventures of  
Changó are mixed up in African and  
American mythology where he is revered  
as the god of war, fertility and dance.

In the syncretization with Catholic  
Saints, he is identified as Saint  
Barbara.)<sup>1</sup>

Zapata Olivella's novel, amasses over seven hundred pages and is divided into five historicized parts: the first "Los Orígenes" (The Beginning), re-chronicles the origin of the species from the standpoint of African mythology; the section, "El Muntu Americano" (The American Muntu), conveys the struggles of Africans in a Colombian context; "La rebelión de los voduns" (The Voodoo Rebellion), the third part and the section under consideration for this investigation, is the fictional account of Haiti and the Haitian Revolution; the fourth part, "Las sangres encontradas" (Opposing Bloods), deals with the involvement of Africans in the revolutionary movements in South America and Mexico; and, the final part of the novel, "Los Ancestros Combatientes" (Dueling Ancestors), recounts the struggles for freedom and equality in North America. Africa and the New World experiences of her stolen legacies form the narrative settings. In essence, *Changó* emerges as the fictional re-presentation of the predicament of Afro-Americans in the Diaspora.

Comprised of three chapters, "La Rebelión de los Voduns" (The Voduns Rebellion) offers an allegorical account of the formation of the island nation-state and re-positions the events of the Revolution. The first chapter, "Hablan los caballos y sus jinetes" (The Horses and Their Jockeys Speak), allegorically revisits colonialism, slavery and the beginning slave revolts in Haiti. "El Tambor de Bouckman" (Bouckman's Drum), the second chapter, re-tells the histories of Bouckman, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henri Christophe as their revolutionary revolts serve as preludes to independence from Imperial France marked by the defeat of Napoleon, General Charles Leclerc and the notoriously brutal Donatien Rochambeau. The final chapter, "Libertad o muerte" (Freedom or Death), continues with the symbolic narration of the Revolution and

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from original language to English are my own.

the rise of Haiti as the first Black republic in the world, the second independent country in the Western Hemisphere and the first country in the Americas to abolish slavery, granting full citizenship to Blacks. The key to the coalescence of these histories is the importance of the Voodoo religion with its collective membership, referred to in the text as the *Muntu*: comprising the *Orichas*, the African ancestors, the African descended dead and the living.

With its basis firmly planted in the Yoruba traditions of Haitian Voodoo, its pantheon of deities, form the narrative histories imbedded in this part of the work. African mythology laced with the marvelously real runs amuck. The allegorical narration begins in the first chapter when a sparrow flies into the cell of the captured L'Ouverture and settles on his shoulder. The bird, symbolic of freedom and the African myth of the ability of Africans to transform human physical form and fly, is identified as a messenger from Ogún Ngafúa, a Voodoo god, who has come with information from the island. From this point onward, the reader is engulfed into a symbolic space where orthodox historical accounts and paradigms are effaced with Africanized folklore, mythology and accounts of resistance, revolt, independence and nation building. From the title, the reader is introduced to the talking, Mr. Ed-like (to borrow from US television sitcom) horse that has been possessed by the spirit of Bouckman whose jockey is none other than Toussaint L'Ouverture. Totally void of Western linear narration and chronology, the varied narrators assume the voices of mythological heroes of the Haitian Revolution including L'Ouverture, Dessaline and others as they communicate with the *Muntu*, or the collective, in order to re-tell the arrival of Columbus, Napoleon, and others. With regard to narratively re-imagining Haiti through post-colonial allegory, Manuel Zapata Olivella thematically treats the histories of the Encounter, Colonialism and Slavery through a symbolic anecdote told by Mackandal, one of the most celebrated leaders of slave uprisings in the Americas. Mackandal equates to Nat Turner in the history of slavery in the US; however, unlike Turner, he embodies the essence of Africanized mythology in the

Americas as his presence is evoked from the burning stake from which he flies away and escapes into the collective memory of the people. Mackandal surfaces as the voice of the ancient griot retelling the story of the island and its inhabitants. He begins this history in the form of an allegory involving the history of three handkerchiefs. Mackandal takes his straw hat, covers a glass of water and summons the spirits of the ancestors through prayer. After the Ancestors join the living, Mackandal uncovers the glass and pulls from it a yellow handkerchief and states: "Los primeros dueños de esta isla fueron los indios que tenían la piel de este color" (Zapata Olivella, 288) (The first owners of this island were the Indians whose skin was this color). Then he repeats the ritual involving the straw hat and glass of water and slowly pulls a white handkerchief and says: "Después de los indios, llegaron los franceses con sus caras pálidas como este trapo" (Zapata Olivella, 288-289) (After the Indians, the French came with pale faces like this rag). Then he takes the yellow handkerchief and squeezes it with his fist draining all the water from it and continues: "Esto hizo la Loba Blanca con el indio" (Zapata Olivella, 289) (This is what the white man did to the Indian). Finally, Mackandal extracts a third handkerchief from the glass, a black one, balls it up between his hands, then waves it and states: "Esto han hecho los blancos con nosotros" (Zapata Olivella, 289) (White men have done this with us). Infuriated, Mackandal shreds the white handkerchief to pieces with his teeth and shouts to the on-listeners: "Los africanos libraremos a los indios y mestizos de esta isla de toda opresión!" (Zapata Olivella, 289) (Africans, we will free this island's Indians and Mulattoes from all oppression!). This marks the call for revolt and revolution. Positioned as a total disruption of official history through allegory, Zapata Olivella symbolically represents the Indigenous, French and African through a symbolic metaphor involving colored handkerchiefs drawn from a glass of water. He complicates their historical involvement by visually illustrating the annihilation of the Indigenous population and the enslavement of Africans. Infuriated by such egregious acts, Mackandal symbolically suggests death to the French and incites the spirit of Revolution as a form of resistance.

A final textual example of post-colonial allegory involves the subversion of a Westernized account of the roles of Mackandal, Bouckman, L'Ouverture, Desssalines, Christophe and others. Official history does not position the feats of each historical figure as a part of a collective whole occurring simultaneously; instead, they are presented in linear chronology relative to the time in which they emerge into the history of slave revolts, Revolution and independence. However, Zapata Olivella cunningly subverts linear chronology and presents in-concert, the feats of each personality. As Mackandal begins his nocturnal raids throughout Haitian slave plantations, the living, the spirits of the gods, and the dead, accompany him. Bouckman, is presented in collaboration with L'Ouverture. L'Ouverture's spirit guides Desssalines and Christophe. The spirits of the gods, the dead and fallen heroes interact within the novel as a part of a continuous present. Their domain is a space where the past, present and future converge. Awakened by the replications of Bouckman's drum, the living-dead shares in the struggle with the Muntu for the emancipation of Haiti and her people.

Manuel Zapata Olivella's *Changó, el gran putas* provides scholars of Spanish American literature with a ripe text for critical analysis. This author re-imagines, that is, recreates in the imagination of the reader a literary history of Haiti from the gaze of a key component of Haitian culture, the Voodoo religious tradition. Through the use of allegory, the author illustrates early histories of peoples and geographical spaces in order to render a narrative discourse that disrupts, contests and challenges Westernized historical accounts of the Encounter, Colonialism, Slavery and the aftermath in what is today, the Republic of Haiti. The author delicately yet unabatedly scripts an account of the Revolution that challenges Western narrative construction. First, the historical event is written from the standpoint of African cosmology whereby the presence of the collective is narrated. The Muntu, comprising African gods, the Ancestors, the dead and the living commune, communicate and rise up against historical oppression. This ideology of collectivity is antithetical to Imperial ideology; and, thus renders a counter-



discourse that is Africa-centric instead of Euro-centric. In addition, the allegorical interpretation of the Revolution is a post-colonial re-positioning of how people and events are regarded. Eurocentric historical accounts "read" the Revolution as a vicious attack on Whiteness perpetrated by savage slaves who massacred mercilessly. In Zapata Olivella's positioning, the view of the Haitian Revolution dislodges the conditioned colonial interpretation and re-positions the Revolution as the desire of an enslaved and oppressed people to experience the denied liberties resulting from the African holocaust in Haiti exhibiting the desire of those Africans and generational descents to resist Imperial power in order to rise as a free and independent nation of Black people. To this end, Zapata Olivella reminds the reader that: "La historia de la República de Haiti para los olvidadizos escribas de la Loba sera siempre la masacre de los negros fanatizados por el odio contra sus hermanos blancos, nunca el genocidio de los esclavistas contra un pueblo indefenso" (Zapata Olivella, 314) (For the forgetful, of the white man you will always write the history of Haiti to be the massacre of fanatic Blacks due to the hate of their white brothers and never of the genocide of slave masters against a defenseless people).

In conclusion, the literary presentation and representation of Haiti and the Haitian Revolution in *Changó* is one that exemplifies post-colonial allegory. Conventional historical narration is disrupted by allegory and mythology, which gave way to a narrative that characteristically distances itself from conventionality. In lieu of a linear presentation of times, places and historical figures, they appear transformed, interspersed within a cosmology void of Western manipulation. Additionally, traceable historical personalities emerge from magical constructions such as talking animals, situated within the text as parasitic repositories for resurrected spirits. It is the magically provocative narration shown in *Changó* that distinguishes Manuel Zapata Olivella from his peers. His historical breadth of knowledge on the African Diaspora, his display of an expertise in African mythology and folklore coupled with his talent as a writer create a

colorful palate from which artistic re-imagining and re-positioning are blended into masterful works. *Changó, el gran putas* is without doubt, such a creation.

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