

Editor's Note

Manuel Zapata Olivella is one of the greatest writers of Afro-Latin American descent and has earned a permanent place among the best writers in Latin America. His *Changó, el gran putas* (1983) contains all of the characteristics of the finest novels of the Boom and post-Boom periods, which gave Spanish American literature instant world recognition, and Zapata Olivella's novel should be required reading for any serious specialist of literature. Unfortunately, this is not the case. We still live in an era in which many scholars of Latin American literature cannot look beyond the writer's African heritage.

As we move into the twenty-first century, a significant number of readers and scholars remain unfamiliar with Zapata Olivella's work. Some hold steadfastly to a Eurocentric concept of culture, are unwilling to accept alternate notions of writing, and are indifferent about the contributions made by writers of African descent to literary studies. These scholars, who are quick to pass judgment, do so without having read the authors or understood the works in question, and tend to classify them as secondary or marginal writers. This narrow vision has denied meritorious authors, such as Juan Francisco Manzano and Candelario Obeso, their rightful place among classic or canonical authors. Literary scholars have the responsibility to broaden their knowledge and make works such as those written by Zapata Olivella part of the curriculum. Until such time, the *Afro-Hispanic Review* continues to play a vital role in questioning canon formation.

The present Special Issue honors the prolific and highly talented writer Manuel Zapata Olivella. Though I feel I have always embodied Manuel's ideas, I did not have the pleasure of meeting him until the first Afro-Latin American Research Association meeting, held in Salvador-Bahia, in August of 1996. As was to be expected, Manuel contributed to the dynamic and at times heated discussions surrounding the subject of race, often bringing into focus topics that appeared to have gone astray. But more meaningful to me were the bus rides we shared sitting comfortably at the back of the bus, conversing as we toured the various sites in and around Bahia. In those precious moments, Manuel shared with me the knowledge he had accumulated throughout his lifelong experiences. But the conversation did not center exclusively around his ideas. He was also interested in mine, and the passion, energy, and determination with which I expressed them. I soon learned that we were of like minds.

During one of those memorable bus rides, Manuel told me about his latest novel, *Hemingway, el cazador de la muerte*. In his narrative voice, Manuel explained the fabulous story of how one of the premiere U. S. writers, known for his love of wild game and deep sea fishing, interacted with the Kenyan terrain, and was ultimately

defeated by Africa's expansiveness. Though I was intrigued by the story, I asked myself what Manuel's latest project had to do with the themes discussed in works such as *Chambacú*, *Changó*, *¡Levántate mulato!* or his comments in the ALARA conference. But Manuel's purpose was different than before; he was looking for a broader readership and asked me to help him publish his latest novel in the United States. As soon as I returned to Nashville, with the manuscript in hand, I contacted Juan Manuel Salvat, the owner of Ediciones Universal, whose publishing company has become a household name among certain sectors of the U. S. Hispanic population. In a telephone conversation, I explained to Pepe the unique opportunity to publish a renowned writer like Zapata Olivella. I followed up my conversation with a trip to the bookstore on Calle 8, in Miami's Little Havana, and handed him a copy of the manuscript. After placing them in touch with each other, I felt a great sense of accomplishment, for I was certain that this arrangement would be mutually beneficial for both author and publisher.

Time, however, narrated a different story. With my usual chaotic schedule, I lost track of Manuel. However, I periodically consulted the catalogues published by Ediciones Universal, without seeing any mention of the addition of Manuel's novel to the most recent lists. It was evident that Manuel and Pepe had not reached an agreement. I could only imagine what had transpired. Manuel was seeking recognition from publishers outside of Bogotá or Colombia, just as he had done with *Corral de negros*, published by Casa de las Américas, and *En Chimá nace un santo*, published by Seix Barral, two publishing companies who, at that time, were attempting to create a new direction by going against the grain. Though Ediciones Universal was a recognized publisher of Cuban studies, and had included in its lists books on the subject of Afro-Cuban culture, such as Jorge and Isabel Castellanos's *Cultura afrocubana* (4 volumes) and many fine works by Lydia Cabrera, there may have been a fear of testing the waters with a writer of African descent, especially someone outside of the Cuban diaspora. At that time, Zapata Olivella would have been the only author of African descent published by Ediciones Universal.

Perhaps *Hemingway, el cazador de la muerte* provides insight into a recent stage in Manuel's life. Though the novel had been published by Bogotá's Arango Editores, Manuel felt that Hemingway's presence would be of interest to a wider audience, especially one residing in the United States. After all, as evidenced by *Changó*, Africa or the African diaspora underscores an interconnection among the different ethnic groups residing in the Caribbean, Central and South America, and the United States. From a different perspective, the geographic boundaries are arbitrary or hold a secondary position to more pressing issues previously outlined by the conquest of the New World. Hemingway is that central figure that reverses the process and, from

the New World, returns to Africa, the mother of all origins, in which East meets West; Hemingway's style is contrasted to that of Kenyatta's, the first president of Kenya and a tireless fighter for his country's freedom. The novel reconstructs how a Western dominant figure interacts with Africa and its inhabitants as a representation of how Westerners relate to people of African descent in other parts of the world. In effect, the role of colonizer and colonized continues to be repeated.

I want to thank our Guest Editors, professors Laurence Prescott and Antonio Tillis, for accepting my invitation to put together the present issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, "Homenaje a Manuel Zapata Olivella," and to Edelma Zapata Pérez, for her dedication to keeping the memory of her father alive.

William Luis
Editor

