Book Review

Bird of paradise: How I became Latina

Raquel Cepeda
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Timely and extraordinarily original, Raquel Cepeda's ambitious first book draws on the science of ancestral DNA testing to examine what it means to be Black, Native, Dominican and American in an allegedly post-racial society. *Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina* widens the scope of Latin@ studies by forging novel venues of exploration into history and the social and biological sciences, among other academic disciplines. With humor, heart and a streetwise vernacular that evokes the lyrical styling of Junot Díaz, Cepeda challenges us to think critically about how the construction and deployment of the term "Latino" by the census and mass media shape presumptions of who is Latin@ in the US cultural imaginary.

An esteemed journalist and documentary filmmaker, Cepeda now shines as a charismatic hip-hop storyteller. Like an urban *griot*, she chronicles the past and present, imparts insight into the future and charms audiences with colorful prose that flows from her pen like spoken word poetry. Born in the United States to Dominican parents, sent to Paraíso, Dominican Republic intermittently to live with her grandparents and raised by an abusive father in New York City at the dawn of the hip-hop movement, Raquel Cepeda travels many worlds. She embodies the sort of historic migrations, cultural exchanges and overlapping diasporas that have shaped the Americas.

The beginning of her two-part memoir reads like a fractured coming-of-age tale rendered from an impressive archive of recollections, and supplemented with interviews of her estranged parents. Rememory proves a useful literary technique in describing how the energetic presence of African and Native entities, which Cepeda comes to recognize as her ancestral *guías* (spirit guides), deliver her from a borderline-catastrophic childhood toward self-realization. Her father Eduardo's obsessive complex with passing for White American only strengthens young Raquel's resolve to excavate her family's occulted heritage. In the second half of the book, she contemplates astonishing DNA test results revealing where her predecessors hailed from before they reached the island of Hispañola and became Latin@. Although the transition between parts one and two feels rather abrupt, the transcendental theme of survival provides narrative consistency through the storyline.

Accessibility is one of the book's greatest merits, and Cepeda wisely positions herself not only as a reliable autobiographer and conscientious researcher, but as a likeable narrator to whom readers can relate. "My word is bond," she avows in the author's note, as if sharing secrets with a trusted confidant. Another major strength is Cepeda's theorization of Latin@ identity as multiracial, transnational, diasporic and flexible. Her arguments find footing in well-curated interviews with renowned scholars and spiritual leaders like Dominican historian

Frank Moya Pons, Jorge Estevez and Rabbi Rav Dovber. Yet, anecdotes of the relationships and neighborhood interactions that define the author's adolescence in Washington Heights offer the most persuasive evidence for these radical ideas. Notably, New York's socially conscious hip-hop culture imbues her with powerful discursive strategies for problematizing dominant paradigms of classification.

Cepeda courageously speaks to the ways racialization complicates *latinidad*. She describes her face as a genetic mosaic of features on display for public analysis. "You look like you could be from anywhere, Rachel," a neighbor comments (96). "I don't look all the way White or all the way Black," explains the author. "I look like someone who's a little bit of both and then some – an *Other*" (xiv). In chronicling the myriad ways phenotype complicates social identity and belonging, Cepeda validates a growing demographic of readers like me, who do not fit cleanly into US census categories. For example, as a bilingual mixed-race woman, I seem to embody a potpourri of confounding cultural markers that compel complete strangers to inquire about my origins: "Excuse me, what is your nationality?" "What I mean is … what *are* you? Because you look [insert descriptor]." Identity policing, although rarely malicious, becomes an invasive form of *Other*ing. I interpret it as a by-product of occupying a body perceived as racially ambiguous, or "exotic." Mixed-race subjects often negotiate their racialization in ways that are invisible to US mainstream society and overlooked in scholarly research. Given the difficulty of amassing empirical data on the nuances of identity construction, literature represents a crucial aperture for interrogating racial *Other*ing. In bringing visibility to the Afro-Latin@/multiracial/*mestizo* experience, *Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina* strengthens a literary vanguard pioneered by Piri Thomas in *Down These Mean Streets* (1967). Thomas' autobiographical novel broke a long silence by exposing the psychological turmoil of being a Black Puerto Rican-Cuban in East Harlem.

In the twenty-first century, historical fiction, narrative testimony, performance art and poetry signify productive spaces for contemplating the porous and highly conflictive networks of racial and national identity emerging from the multiply positioned subjects of Caribbean diasporic communities in the United States. Recent works by Loida Maritza Pérez, Jaqueline Jiménez-Polanco, Ana Lara, Silvio Torres-Saillant, Josefina Báez, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa, Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez-Román, among other scholar-writers, deconstruct Black denial, Indigenism and the pervasive Latin American racial whitening ideology of *blanqueamiento*. In addressing race–color issues, they also convey the inadequacy of the US paradigm to accommodate their presence as multifaceted transnational subjects within existing conventions. Raquel Cepeda builds on and expands contemporary US Latin@ Caribbean literature and cultural studies in important ways. Namely, her text centralizes the temporal, spatial and social justice struggles of marginalized communities that continue to face systematic forms of silencing. For instance, she challenges prevailing assertions that the Taínos were unequivocally extinguished during New World conquest. Her investigation unearths convincing evidence of Native Caribbean survival through resistance strategies, such as maroonage. She further insinuates the cultural survival motif with unelaborated references to Afro-Caribbean folklore and Yoruba religious practices. Nevertheless, the book presents methodological limitations that invite dispute. Specifically, academic circles may accuse Cepeda of conceding too much agency to ancestral DNA tests. Prominent social scientists including Alondra Nelson and Kamari Clarke interrogate the scientific validity

of these exams as reliable indicators of genetic origin. The corporate agendas behind the marketing of popular ancestry test kits merit critique as well.

While *Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina* is engaging for interdisciplinary scholars and a worthwhile addition to high school curriculums, this text has epic connotations for the local and global communities from which it emerged. Somewhere within the nebulous space between storytelling and prophecy blooms a compelling journey that enriches the growing corpus of first- and second-generation US Latin@ immigrant stories, and ultimately ruptures dominant narratives of Western intellectual tradition.

Reference

Thomas, P. 1967. *Down These Mean Streets*. New York: Vintage Books.

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