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# Realism in Contemporary Afro-Hispanic Drama

## **Abstract**

Contemporary Afro-Hispanic drama offers a breadth of images that at first might be judged unrelated. 1 Take, for instance, the Afro-Uruguayan families evicted from their homes in Jorge Emilio Cardoso's *El desalojo en la calle de los negros* (The Eviction on the Street of the Black People, 1992); the Costa Rican mestizo of humble origins trying to scale the social ladder while confronting a greedy oligarch in Quince Duncan's *El trepasolo* (The Lone Climber, 1993); 2 or the Equatorial Guinean people trying to sort out the capricious rules imposed by a dictatorial regime in Juan Tomas Avila Laurel's *Los hombres domésticos* (Homeboys, 1992).<sup>3</sup> When seen together, such images provide a thematic spectrum that cuts across discourses of identity, geographic locations, and specific local circumstances. Yet, these dramas engage in a specific mode of analytical poetics that are rooted in the oral and written traditions of the African diaspora and that convey a twofold message of solidarity and solutions to problems. Through the examination of the above-mentioned plays, I submit that Afro-Hispanic drama published during and after the 1990s conveys a highly analytical form of realist depiction. While this realism is in alignment with previous models of aesthetic representation put forward by Hispanic intellectuals of African descent, contemporary Afro-Hispanic realist drama is also characterized by transethnic and transnational outlooks, that is, by a cosmopolitan perspective that corresponds to the globalized context in which these works were produced.

## **Disciplines**

Latin American Languages and Societies | Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

## **Comments**

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## Realism in Contemporary Afro-Hispanic Drama

*Elisa Rizo*

Contemporary Afro-Hispanic drama offers a breadth of images that at first might be judged unrelated.<sup>1</sup> Take, for instance, the Afro-Uruguayan families evicted from their homes in Jorge Emilio Cardoso's *El desalojo en la calle de los negros* (The Eviction on the Street of the Black People, 1992); the Costa Rican mestizo of humble origins trying to scale the social ladder while confronting a greedy oligarch in Quince Duncan's *El trepasolo* (The Lone Climber, 1993);<sup>2</sup> or the Equatorial Guinean people trying to sort out the capricious rules imposed by a dictatorial regime in Juan Tomas Avila Laurel's *Los hombres domésticos* (Homeboys, 1992).<sup>3</sup> When seen together, such images provide a thematic spectrum that cuts across discourses of identity, geographic locations, and specific local circumstances. Yet, these dramas engage in a specific mode of analytical poetics that are rooted in the oral and written traditions of the African diaspora and that convey a twofold message of solidarity and solutions to problems. Through the examination of the above-mentioned plays, I submit that Afro-Hispanic drama published during

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<sup>1</sup> Afro-Hispanic drama is understood here as the corpus of plays written by black writers in Spanish-speaking Latin America and in sub-Saharan Spanish-speaking Africa. Albeit a reduced corpus, more texts are being made available; an example is the recent anthology *Del Palenque a la escena: antología crítica de teatro afro-latinoamericano* (Jaramillo and Cook, eds).

Although not dealt with in this essay, it is important to keep in mind that besides written dramas, Afro-Hispanic theatre includes a long-standing set of performatic artistic expressions within African and Afro-Latin American communities, from comparsas, to musical groups, to rituals, to theatre companies, among many other expressions.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Mosby's translation of the title (see *Place, Language and Identity in Afro-Costa Rican Literature*, 120).

<sup>3</sup> Marvin Lewis's translation of the title (see *An Introduction to the Literature of Equatorial Guinea*, 88).

and after the 1990s conveys a highly analytical form of realist depiction. While this realism is in alignment with previous models of aesthetic representation put forward by Hispanic intellectuals of African descent, contemporary Afro-Hispanic realist drama is also characterized by transethnic and transnational outlooks, that is, by a cosmopolitan perspective that corresponds to the globalized context in which these works were produced.<sup>4</sup>

Far from being a naïve report of facts and circumstances, the realist style of the dramas by Cardoso, Duncan, and Avila surfaces as an analytical tool to dismantle power relations imbedded in the modern state and its supporting structures (social, cultural, or economic). Indeed, a characteristic of realist Afro-Hispanic contemporary drama is that it critiques an ambiguous paternalistic rhetoric generated by the state that simultaneously declares concern and imposes limitations to civilians' rights and freedoms.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, when reading Afro-Hispanic realist drama employing Foucault's framework of power relations, one finds a consistent focus in these plays on such processes as the differentiation of peoples (by ethnicity, by tradition, or by other means), the objectives of those exercising power over others (to maintain their status or to ensure economic gain, for example), the manner in which power relations are put in practice (through laws, military force, surveillance, etc.), and the ways in which these relations of power are institutionalized, made effective, and maintained.<sup>6</sup> That is, Afro-Hispanic realist drama underscores the multilayered forces at work within power relations.

Subsequently, this dramatic corpus signals a critical detachment from state narratives. As these dramas address concrete challenges endured by communities or individuals, they also convey alternative ways of looking for solutions outside of designs imposed by the state. Moreover, these plays facilitate the formulation of community or individual inquiries in a way that fosters the transformation of a situation of oppression, despair, or frustration into gates for

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<sup>4</sup> Here, I follow Appiah's definition of cosmopolitanism.

<sup>5</sup> My definition of paternalistic state power is informed by the concept of "pastoral power."

With origins in medieval times, this term refers to a commitment of a Christian authority to the "salvation" of its subjects. In "The Subject and the Power" Foucault states that the "pastoral power" is a type of power relation that has been successfully transformed and adopted in modern states (208-26).

<sup>6</sup> These mechanics of power relations are posed by Foucault, *ibidem*.

reflection and vindication. But this analytical model is not new in the discursive traditions of the African diaspora. As Jerome Branche reminds us, “the act of revisiting a moment of rupture or loss in order to reflect and, ultimately, to reach liberation from oppressive systems is one of the basic principles of the discourse of identity in the African diaspora” (31).<sup>7</sup> For this scholar, such community-based response to outside impositions has resulted in a type of “solidarity capable of transcending both whitening efforts in social, political, economic, and cultural alignments, and narrow Afro-centric perspectives” (op. cit. 39). Indeed, *malungaje poetics*, the term coined by Branche to describe this mode of transmitting information and seeking solutions, is a recognizable feature of realist Afro-Hispanic drama. Malungaje poetics and its history of resisting the effects of power structures can be identified in the cosmopolitan trend of ethical, social, historical, and political analysis presented in this dramatic corpus.

To be sure, the type of community-based epistemology that Branche identifies as the poetics of *malungaje* is visible in other proposals by Afro-Latin American intellectuals, especially during the second half of the twentieth century. Take, for instance, the concept of “popular theatre for identification” advanced by Afro-Colombian writer Manuel Zapata Olivella in the 1970s. His proposal demanded an activist-research approach on behalf of artists and anthropologists engaged in promoting theatrical practices that truly served disenfranchised communities. As Zapata Olivella stated:

Si no se pone suficiente atención a las divergencias de criterio, tratando en todo momento de comprender y respetar el punto de vista de la comunidad, se asumiría la actitud común del manipulador, que subestimando el pensamiento de la comunidad, o rechazándolo de plano, trata por todos los medios de imponer los suyos propios. Los resultados son conocidos, en esto no se trata de entender y aprender la cultura tradicional, sino de destruirla y colonizarla. (61)

If we don't pay enough attention to the differences of judgment, if we don't make a consistent effort to understand and to respect the community's point of view, we could end up adopting the attitude of the manipulator, who underestimates the community's

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<sup>7</sup> All translations from Spanish to English in this essay are mine, unless otherwise noted.

way of thinking. Or, we could even go as far as rejecting the community's knowledge and trying to impose our own. We have seen the results of such enterprises: instead of understanding and learning from a traditional culture, they end up destroying and colonizing traditional cultures.

Embracing an ethical commitment to facilitating the inward processes of community reflection and decision-making, Zapata Olivella's research team recorded the oral wealth of black, indigenous, and mestizo communities across Colombia. His strategy involved researching and archiving legends, myths, music, dance, mask making, and other embodied expressions containing local epistemologies (71). For Zapata, social change had to be community driven:

[Los] cambios no pueden ser otros que los sentidos realmente por la comunidad y no los impuestos desde fuera por fuerzas distorsionadoras. Si tales cambios no arrancan de la esencia misma de los intereses comunitarios, de los intereses tradicionales, no tendría que acudir a un teatro fundamentado en las raíces históricas del pueblo. (71)

[The] changes cannot be but those that are truly felt by the community; they cannot be imposed by outside forces with distorting views. If change does not stem from the essence of communal interests, from traditional interests, we could not aspire to propose a theatre based on the historical roots of the people.

Because the "theatre for popular identification" is committed to the liberation of all marginalized peoples, one could think that this concept is not directly rooted in the history of the African diaspora, as the poetics of *malungaje* are. However, the ethical and epistemological nature of Zapata's method of self-discovery and liberation is in alignment with *malungaje*'s proposal of identification and solidarity.

*Malungaje* poetics can also be traced in Quince Duncan's 2005 proposal of *afrorealismo*, a theorization of the identity discourse existent in works by black writers in the Americas. For Duncan, *afrorealism* comprises the assertion of elements such as the voice of Afro-Americans through the use of afro-centric terminology, the avowal of African symbolism, the vindication of

the historical memory of the African diaspora, the concept of ancestral community, and the development of an inward community view. All of these characteristics, according to Duncan, work in tandem with the objective of searching and affirming an African-based identity, which had been historically denied and distorted (Duncan, *El Afrorealismo*). While Duncan's theory centers on literary writing in general, and not only theatre, it reveals a common trend within Afro-Hispanic literature: fostering a sense of community to achieve solutions, such as protecting a group's collective memory and identity.

My approach to contemporary Afro-Hispanic drama is informed by two dialogues, which, in spite of having been developed in different contexts, involve the elements of social justice and realist depictions. On the one hand, I consider the above-mentioned discursive and literary theories of community liberation advanced by Branche, Zapata Olivella, and Duncan. On the other hand, I look at the recent discussion of realisms in the literature produced by minority groups (not only of African descent) across the world. Duncan's proposal, for example, coincides with several aspects of the discussions about philosophical and literary realism, especially in regards to building identity discourses. The Costa Rican author's ideas are in alignment with those of Santya P. Mohanty, a leading scholar in contemporary realism, who has stated that:

Realists about identity argue . . . that the future of progressive social struggles depends on greater clarity about the ways in which identity claims are justified, clarity about where and why such claims are valid, and where and why they are specious. Realists propose that we take the epistemic content of experiences and identities of minoritized groups seriously, since they contain alternative (buried or explicit) accounts of the world we all share. The development of objective knowledge about society grows out of an engagement with such alternative perspectives. ("Realist Theory")

Realism, then, emerges as a literary model in alignment with a larger concern for global social justice, which, as de Souza Santos reminds us, is only possible through the attainment of "global cognitive justice" (xix). Again, that commitment to justice is present in the theorizations by Duncan but also in those proposed by Zapata Olivella and Branche. Equally, the type of realist depictions that I identify in contemporary drama by Afro-Hispanic writers is in alignment with both conversations in that it links literature to social justice. While Afro-Hispanic realist

drama exhibits points in common with the poetics of *malungaje* defined by Branche, especially those referring to a discourse of liberation not limited to identity discourses (such as limiting afro-centrism, for example), it differs from the other two proposals. On the one hand, Zapata's "theatre for popular identification" was informed by anthropological work done in specific communities to salvage culture-based ways to achieve solutions. On the other hand, Duncan's "afrorealism" calls for the literary depiction of the challenges pertaining exclusively to the communities of the African diaspora. Different from Zapata's "popular theatre for identification," contemporary realist Afro-Hispanic dramas attend to the formal requirements of Western theatre while informing their plays from communal experience and an awareness of external structures of oppression. Unlike Duncan's afrorealism, this realist dramatic corpus, while grounded by the same strategy of community and solidarity, also attends to issues not exclusive to black communities.

Moving towards a model with which to approach realist Afro-Hispanic contemporary drama, I suggest considering the concept of *scenarios of becoming*. Here, I am borrowing Diana Taylor's definition of "scenario,"<sup>8</sup> which describes the reenactment of an established plot in a given situation with the possibility of rearticulating its value, hence providing that situation with new meaning in a new context. For Taylor, in scenarios, "Social actors may be assigned roles deemed static and inflexible by some. Nonetheless, the irreconcilable friction between the social actors and the roles allows for degrees of critical detachment and cultural agency" (29). The potential for "scenarios" to break fixed categories is matched here with the concept of "becoming," explained by Deleuze and Guattari as a process of movement resulting from alliances that cut across fragmentations imposed in a given space (238-39). Thus, identifying a "scenario of becoming" in a realist drama (by Afro-Hispanic writers or others), would indicate first, the portrayal of a great pressure imposed by power relations, and, second, a movement out of such pressure through solidary actions fostered by analysis (i.e., the conceptual connection of concrete issues with deeper historical, social, political, or economic dimensions). Hence, the

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<sup>8</sup> This concept has been proven immensely valuable in approaching reformulations of identity discourses in theatre. For example, Christen Smith has combined Taylor's concept of "scenario" with Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "contact zones" in an insightful analysis of race relations as portrayed in Brazilian street theater.

term “scenarios of becoming” refers to dramas (and other cultural expressions) that exhibit transversal movements across established hierarchies and restrictions imposed by the state or other entities in order to free people from imposed subjectivities.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The Eviction on the Street of the Black People and the Redesigning of Space Distribution in the Capital City.***

The concept of “scenarios of becoming” allows the necessary flexibility to approach the variety of contexts addressed in contemporary realist Afro-Hispanic drama. Take, for instance, *The Eviction on the Street of the Black People* (1992) by Afro-Uruguayan playwright Jorge Emilio Cardoso (1938–), a dramatist and narrator devoted to the strengthening of the identity discourse of the Afro-Uruguayan community (Lewis, *Afro-Uruguayan Literature* 104). Cardoso locates *The Eviction* in the Montevideo of the 1970s to unveil specific mechanisms of control imposed by the state regime of the time (a military dictatorship) over the Afro-Uruguayan community. Specifically, Cardoso illustrates how, through a paternalistic discourse, the regime executed a fragmentation of the urban space in the capital city on the bases of social and racial identification, which directly affected black Uruguayans living in centrally situated rental housing. At first sight *The Eviction* could be read as a simplistic drama that denounces the state-imposed strategies used to eliminate the presence of black people in a central neighborhood of Montevideo. A closer analysis, however, reveals the incident of the eviction through its connection to a deeper issue: the ongoing omission of black Uruguayans from the discourse of national identity. In alignment with the model of scenarios of becoming, *The Eviction* is not limited to only denouncing the problems of the Afro-Uruguayan community at a certain historical moment, but it also provides a critical reflection of the problem from an alternative perspective. This is mediated by a community based communicative code: Candombe, a traditional practice that proves to be the key to the survival of the group’s sense of identity.

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<sup>9</sup> This understanding of scenario is in alignment with the concept of “transversal tactics” by performance theorist Brian Reynolds. The concept of transversal tactics refers to actions that transgress given (or even imposed) subjectivities or territories towards inclusive dialogue to solve problems (3).

Cardoso's play identifies the legal procedures followed by the state in order to remove Afro-Uruguayans and other mixed-race peoples inhabiting old rental housing, or *conventillos*. As discussed by Lauren Benton's socio-historical study of the 1970s evictions in Montevideo, the regime instituted housing laws that either prohibited the rental of certain buildings (due to their supposed poor conditions) or elevated the rental prices (which forced poor residents out of buildings), effectively engaging in a process of race and class differentiation veiled by a rhetoric of public safety. Such rhetoric justified the inspection of many buildings by a "technical team" that, in turn, certified the need for dislodging hundreds of families to the former city stables (Benton 42-44). Seen retrospectively, the contrast between the regime's ostensibly protective rhetoric and its action of displacing families to quarters meant for animals emphasizes the hypocrisy of the regime's implementation of "citizen safety."

As Benton also notes, the evictions occurred at a time when life in Montevideo's *conventillos* had increasingly become synonymous with poverty. Living in a *conventillo* had also come to signal the ownership of an important cultural hub built around Candombe, the musical and performative tradition developed during colonial times among urban free and enslaved blacks.<sup>10</sup> In fact, during the first half of the twentieth century and all through the military regimes, the image of *conventillo* residents as "piteously poor" but also as people able "to transcend poverty" through Candombe rituals may have been perceived as a challenging gesture to authority (39). This relative independence of *conventillo* life with respect to the state's control during the 1970s might have "[played] an important role in the implementation of government policies toward central-city slum housing and in determining the balance of forces between *conventillo* residents and the state" (op. cit. 40).

The ambivalent image of the *conventillo* residents as the city's poorest and as the creators of a unique cultural expression is at the core of the movement across power relations in Cardoso's play. *The Eviction* portrays the interactions between the residents of the *conventillo* in the days prior to their forced departure to their new dwellings. Throughout the play, Candombe

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<sup>10</sup> In 2009, UNESCO inscribed Candombe on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Candombe has since been embraced by the government of Uruguay as a national symbol.

music, dance, and song emerge as a unique language shared by the community, igniting a collective memory and a sense of identity independent from state control.

As the play begins, the stage directions describe the interior of a conventillo apartment. An older woman, Doña Coca, melancholically fans herself in front of the TV as she waits for Fausto, her husband, to return from work. Soon, Kaulícoro, her idealist nephew (whom the couple has adopted as their son) appears on the scene. When he realizes his aunt's sadness, he teases her about the "good old times" and eventually cheers her up, convincing her to dance with him:

KAULÍCORO. (*Va al radiograbador y pone un cassette de Candombe.*) A ver, aquí le pongo un Candombe. . . . Hágame una demostración.

DOÑA COCA. ¡No! ¡No! ¡Qué locura! Estos son otros tiempos . . .

KAULÍCORO. ¿De qué otros tiempos me habla? El Candombe es eternidad. ¡Vamos! Yo le hago el gramillero . . . (*toma la escoba de la cocina.*)

DOÑA COCA. Me puede atacar la artrosis . . .

KAULÍCORO. Le doy unos yuyos y se la curo. ¿Para qué soy el médico de la tribu?

DOÑA COCA. Está bien. ¡Si me buscan me encuentran! (*Toma el abanico que está sobre la mesa, levanta el ruedo dela falda con la mano izquierda y se pone a bailar*) (9-10).

KAULÍCORO. (*Goes to where the tape player is and plays Candombe music.*) Let's see, here is a Candombe. . . . Show me how it's done.

DOÑA COCA. No! No! This is silly! These are different times . . .

KAULÍCORO. What do you mean "different times"? Candombe is eternal. Come on! I will be the broomsman . . . (*He gets the broom from the kitchen.*)

DOÑA COCA. Oh, I should mind my arthritis . . .

KAULÍCORO. I'll give you some homeopathic pills. I am the doctor of the tribe, after all!

DOÑA COCA. All right. You asked for it. (*She takes the fan that she has left on the table, grabs her skirt with her left hand, and begins to dance.*)

With this dance, the characters reenact a traditional performance of Candombe, headed by the *mama vieja* (the old mother), played by Doña Coca, and the *escobillero* (or broomsman), by Kaulícoro, who also reveals himself as the *gramillero* (the herb doctor). With this, *The Eviction* inserts a revision of a recent chapter in Montevideo's history enabled by Candombe poetics. Through this performatic language, the community asserts its identity, analyses its situation, and claims independence from the state's power relations.

While Candombe is the principal venue used to assert the community's identity, *The Eviction* presents other ways in which the characters build a sense of distinctiveness independent from the rules established by the official discourse. One is the call for a revision of national history. Throughout the play, several characters refer to the contributions made by Afro-Uruguayans to the formation of the country. There is great pride among the townspeople regarding the participation of black soldiers who made it possible for the national hero, Artigas, to win the war of independence. As Anselmo, the leader of the community, reflects:

ANSELMO. [P]ero en este país no se respeta el pasado. O sino, vea quien se ha ocupado de nosotros: con nuestro sudor creció la Colonia; durante la guerra por la independencia fuimos al frente, pero nunca nos reconocieron nada. (30)

ANSELMO. [B]ut there is no respect for the past in this country. Who has ever taken care of us? We made the riches during the colonial times with our sweat, and during the war of independence we fought at the battlefield; but they have never recognized our work.

Desolately, the conventillo residents who listen to Anselmo know that the idea of revising the role of Afro-descendants in Uruguayan history is not a possibility in a nation where the government is trying to remove their presence from Montevideo's centrally located buildings. Confronted with the persistent rejection of blacks from Uruguayan national identity, Kaulícoro opts for claiming an African identity. However, the reality of the eviction makes this proposal seem ridiculous to other characters. For example, Eboleva, his girlfriend, states:

EBOLOVA. ¿Por qué te empeñas tanto en buscarme otras patrias? ¡Yo ya tengo una y bien orgullosa que estoy!

KAULÍCORO. Porque eres africana. Esa es tu tierra. Ese es tu pueblo. Y allí, hay una casa esperándote. . . . No te gustaría estar allí, y conmigo . . . así abrazados . . . ¿este momento?

EBOLOVA. ¡Ay! ¡Kaulícoro! Yo vengo tan cansada del ensayo y del calor, pero tan cansada, que lo único que me falta para morirme es justamente eso; ¡irme a África contigo a que me piquen los mosquitos! [AU: Page numbers for this section?] (16)

EBOLOVA. Why do you insist on finding me other homelands? I already have one, and I am proud of it!

KAULÍCORO. Because you are an African. That is your land. They are your people. And there is a home waiting for you there. . . . Wouldn't you like to be there with me, hugging each other, right in this moment?

EBOLOVA. Come on Kaulícoro! I am very tired after that rehearsal, and it is so hot. . . . The last thing I need is going to Africa with you, to be bitten by mosquitos!

Ebolova, a cabaret dancer, criticizes Kaulícoro's idealism, and with this act also sheds light on other sources of their community's concerns: their poverty, their marginalization from society, and their reduced opportunities. Furthermore, this notion of an African identity is proven to be unpopular among most conventillo residents, who consider the problems at hand more urgent, including the racist practices being enforced by the state. Doña Martina, a middle-aged woman, points to the racism influencing their removal:

DOÑA MARTINA. ¿No entienden nuestra situación? ¿que estamos desamparados? . . . ¿que nos arrancan de nuestros hogares por culpa de algún mandamás que no quiere negros en el barrio? (23)

DOÑA MARTINA. Don't you realize our situation? Don't you see that we have no options? . . . Don't you see that they are kicking us out of our homes because some big boss doesn't want blacks in the neighborhood?

Through each of the dialogues among neighbors, Cardoso's play brings attention to the multiple causes of the community's situation: poverty, racism, historical silencing, and even the

law. However, the references to Candombe spread throughout the play effectively affirm the community's cultural independence. The play closes with a Candombe song improvised by some youngsters at the moment of their eviction:

Y mientras que aquí aguardamos . . .  
el momento de partir,  
congreguémonos a oír  
su tañido de añoranza  
que nos dará una esperanza  
para poder resistir. (25)

And while we wait . . .  
for the moment of departure,  
let us congregate to hear,  
the melancholic drums,  
that will provide hope  
to be able to resist.

Even though the material problems of their displacement are not solved through Candombe, the play shows the community's successes gained by the persistence of collective memory and mutual help. Within the framework of scenarios of becoming, elements such as collective chants and dances of Candombe performed in strategic moments during the play underscore that the evicted blacks are the living archive, the embodiment of an epistemology that resides outside of the boundaries set by state laws. The survival of the community's identity, despite their detachment from their traditional space, emphasizes their independence from the state's control.

### ***The Lone Climber and the Violent Theatricality of Social Order***

Similar to *The Eviction*, Quince Duncan's *The Lone Climber* (1993) uses housing as a lens for social analysis. The power relations examined here are not, however, based on race but rather on class. As noted above, Duncan has dedicated a great part of his oeuvre to legitimizing the Afro-Costa Rican identity and to defending the rights of Afro-descendants throughout Latin America. Nonetheless, in *The Lone Climber*, Duncan submits questions that move beyond racial

discrimination, such as the following: What social, political, and economic forces regulate the possibilities of class mobility? Is the concept of class mobility a mirage created by the democratic discourse of the national state?

Contextualized between the 1980s and early 1990s in Costa Rica, *The Lone Climber* brings attention to the huge gap between social classes in Latin America. Its plot signals the theatricality of social order, national identity, and class belonging by delving into the dynamics of an upper-class neighborhood.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the main focus of Duncan's play is not the power relations imposed by the state *per se* but those structures enhanced by the upper class that have contributed to the maintenance of the status quo. Underlying the mechanisms of social exclusions, the plot displays confluent scenarios of corruption, bribery, surveillance, and manipulations created by the affluent in order to maintain their privileged status. Although the scenario of becoming in this play actually depicts a failed intent of upward mobility in the socioeconomic hierarchy, *The Lone Climber* effectively points to the factors that harness such movement, and hence it prompts critical reflection.

Throughout its seven scenes, *The Lone Climber* narrates the story of Carlos Morado, a humble newspaper salesman who, after winning the lottery, decides to put his money away by buying a fancy home. His intention is not to live like a rich man but to continue with his humble lifestyle until it is time to sell the house once his only son reaches a mature age. The play highlights the commotion Morado's arrival causes among neighborhood residents. All along, Morado has to endure the label assigned to him from the beginning: a criminal.

During the first scene, Morado is arrested for entering his new home with his son. Soon we learn that Don Emilio, the neighbor who had him arrested, has a twofold agenda: on the one hand, a vocal commitment to reinforcing "social order" and, on the other, a particular approach to his "right" to protect his own interests (he had planned to buy the house before Morado's

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<sup>11</sup> Here, I follow Juan Villegas's definition of theatricality: "a means of communicating a message by integrating verbal, visual, auditive, body, gestural signs to be performed in front of an audience. The perception of the message is intended to be received visually. The message is ciphered according to codes established by the producer's or receiver's cultural systems. . . . a given theatricality implies a system of 'theatrical' codes which are integrated in the cultural system and the social and political context" (316-17).

sudden arrival). In his prejudice, Don Emilio makes use of all the power relations available to him in order to eject Morado from the neighborhood. With Don Emilio's actions, the play suggests that maintaining a social status is the result of a carefully orchestrated process involving hypocrisy, corruption, manipulation, and deceit. All aspects of the public and private converge in the activities of Don Emilio and other upper-class characters as they navigate their power network: they contribute money to electoral campaigns to influence the government and even use sexual acts as a means to influence and secure liaisons. As Don Emilio states to his maid while she is serving him coffee:

DON EMILIO. No me gusta que nada me estorbe. ¿Entiende? No me gusta que nada se me oponga. Cuando poseo algo lo defiendo y cuando quiero algo lo tomo. (*Toma a la Empleada por la cintura. La muchacha se deja dócilmente . . .*) Necesito tu ayuda; quiero que te hagas amiga de la señora de Morado. Necesito saber todo de ellos. Todo lo que se pueda. (*La besa en una oreja y la muchacha se conmueve . . .*) (25)

DON EMILIO. I don't like it when things get in my way. You hear me? I don't like to have any opposition. When I possess something, I defend it, and when I want something, I take it. (*He takes the maid by the waist. The girl lets him without resistance.*) I need your help; I need you to become friends with Morado's wife. I need to know everything about them. Everything you can. (*He kisses her on the ear and she reacts with excitement.*)

Accordingly, Don Emilio's notion of social order also connects with his opinion on national politics. To him, the national government cannot be trusted with understanding how things should be, and it is up to him to take social and political matters into his own hands. First, he tries explaining the rules of social behavior to Morado. Don Emilio invites his new neighbor for a cup of coffee under the guise of apologizing for having him arrested when they first met. During their meeting, he points Morado to the series of gaps between his behavior and what is expected from people residing on that street.

DON EMILIO. Uno tiene cierta imagen de la gente que vive en este barrio, cierto

concepto. Y uno ve la gente en la calle y puede decir, éste vive en tal barrio y estos otros viven en tales otros barrios. Uno espera que los dueños de una casa como ésta, que se yo, sean gente como uno . . . si me disculpa el ejemplo tan personal. {AU: Page number?]} (39)

DON EMILIO. There is a certain image of the people who live in this neighborhood, a certain concept. So that, when you are out in the street you can just tell: this person lives in such-and-such neighborhood, and these other people live in so-and-so other place. One expects the owners of a house like this one to be, I don't know, to be more like me . . . if you would excuse me for the rather personal example.

This interaction reveals a series of social codes that differentiate both men. From linguistic registers to clothing and even pastimes, these seemingly superficial markers of class constitute important and fixed division lines for Don Emilio and the other upper-class characters in the play. Moreover, their status depends on the continuation of those distinctions. The social divide between these two men only increases as the dialogue continues. The scene reveals that, to Don Emilio's disbelief, Morado is simply not interested in keeping up appearances (40), in selling the house for half-a-million profit, as Don Emilio offers (48), and, ultimately, in making more money. At the end of this dialogue, Morado recognizes Don Emilio's intention of removing him from the neighborhood and expresses with dignified sincerity:

MORADO. No queremos más dinero, Don Emilio. No necesito más. Mientras tengamos salud mi vieja y yo, no necesitamos más . . .

DON EMILIO. Pero Morado, no entiendo su razonamiento. He manejado dinero toda mi vida, y se de lo que le estoy hablando. Agarre esta plata.

MORADO. Así es la vida (*se pone de pie*). No hay trato. (52)

MORADO. We don't want more money, Don Emilio. We don't need more money.

As long as we have good health, my wife and I, we won't need more . . .

DON EMILIO. But Morado, I don't follow your argument. I have handled money my whole life. I know what I am talking about. Take this money.

MORADO. Such is life (*He stands up*). There is no deal.

Morado's disinterest in Don Emilio's formula for success highlights the contrast between both men's values, and by extension, the values cherished by their respective social classes. Realizing that he cannot manipulate Morado with offers of protection and financial advice, Don Emilio turns to a set of schemes based on crime accusations with no evidence in order to frame his neighbor.

At last, Don Emilio decides to end the power struggle with the newcomer by simply destroying his name and property. Through a sophisticated plan, he has his maid and guard file charges against Morado for narcotraffic and possession of weapons and explosives, and he also secures the placing of bombs inside Morado's home. All of this results in the cancellation of Morado's agency: not only is his home destroyed and his freedom taken away (due to the false accusations), but he also loses his only son in the explosions.

Duncan's play shows Morado's failed attempt to defy social structures. The notion of a "scenario of becoming" is shown in the character's unfulfilled desire to transgress a sense of social order. Through Don Emilio's schemes, *The Lone Climber* illustrates the logic supporting classism. With each scene, as Don Emilio's criminality becomes clearer, so too do Morado's impeccable ethics. In this representation of "the poor versus the rich," Duncan inverts class stereotypes in Costa Rican culture to call for a revision of the established notion of a social morality that has permitted so much inequality. In the end, *The Lone Climber* does not offer a solution but rather delivers the necessary elements for a critique of Costa Rican classism and the blueprint of the areas most in need of social transformation.

## **Scenarios of Becoming across the Atlantic: Connections between Latin America and Africa.**

As we have seen in Cardoso's *The Eviction on the Street of the Black People* and Duncan's *The Lone Climber*, Afro-Hispanic realist scenarios of becoming can take forms as diverse as the local context to which they refer. But what are the characteristics of such scenarios outside of Latin America? Within the contextual differences and themes that concern dramatists on the African

continent, it is possible to identify a similar plot pattern that highlights the issues affecting society.

Similar to the two Latin American dramatists examined above, many contemporary African intellectuals are concerned with delving into social problems, especially those related to national, ethnic, and linguistic identities. Indeed, given the history of recently imposed geopolitical boundaries, first by colonial powers and then by national governments, the affirmation of ethnic histories within African countries emerges as a key issue. As stated by Justo Bolekia Boleka in *Aproximación a la historia de Guinea Ecuatorial* (Towards a History of Equatorial Guinea):

Los nuevos estados africanos, basados en el modelo occidental europeo, buscaban la homogenización etnocultural de sus súbditos (¡y no ciudadanos!), según las directrices de sus antiguos amos. Las distintas nacionalidades africanas etnolingüísticamente definidas exigían, y siguen exigiendo, el reconocimiento de sus identidades culturales. (156)

The new African states, based on the Western European model, sought the ethno-cultural homogenization of their subjects (and not citizens!), according to the guidelines of their former masters. But the African nations, already defined by ethnicity and language, demanded, and they continue to demand, the recognition of their cultural identities.

Per this intervention, Bolekia points to the marginalization, displacement, and silencing of certain groups due to residual power relations from colonial times that still today affect the social dynamics in Africa. It is logical to think that, like the Afro-Latin Americans Cardoso and Duncan, African dramatists also regard national identity discourses as a core element in the formation of contemporary theatre. These ideas, in combination with a reformulation of embodied indigenous traditions (oral tradition, rituals, dance, music) create what Frances Harding coined as a “theatre of development,” which includes the articulation of an African voice, affirmation of agency, control over narrative structures, and encounters of different social groups that otherwise could not engage in dialogue (Tomás-Cámara xxxiii). The identity politics conveyed by this definition of “theatre of development” bear a resemblance to Zapata Olivella’s

and Duncan's theorizations of literary activity (dramatic and non) in the Americas. Concerning discourses of identity, however, Nigerian dramatist Femi Osofisan points to a new element when he proposes the term "Post-Negritude" to explain how, in contemporary African drama and literature: "all the strategies we employ . . . are attempts to confront, through our plays, our novels and poetry, the various problems of underdevelopment which our countries are facing, and of which the threat of alienation and the potential erosion of ethnic identity constitute only one of the outward signals" (3).

Osofisan stresses the importance of providing critical tools for participation in a self-reflective criticism about Africa's infrastructural challenges, which to him stands among the many challenges caused by globalization. Without a doubt, African intellectuals' and dramatists' attentiveness to identity politics is not only restricted within their national realms. This interest in developing a relational understanding that includes the local and the global is clear in Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's proposal of a "globalectical" approach to reality and texts: "Globalectical reading . . . involves declassifying theory in the sense of making it accessible—a tool for clarifying interactive connections and interconnections of social phenomena and their mutual impact in the local and global space, a means of illuminating the internal and external, the local and the global dynamics of social being" (61).

It is with this rejection of fixed and imposed categorizations such as geopolitical divides and linguistic differences that Wa Thiong'o calls for the identification of similitudes with other people's situations, departing from one's own local experience. Wa Thiong'o's call for liberation from essentialist and limiting identity discourses is in alignment with other calls coming from Afro-Latin America, such as Branche's malungaje poetics. In fact, put together, the notions of globalectics and malungaje poetics signal a movement among intellectuals from both sides of the Atlantic towards a truly cosmopolitan dialogue, beyond racial, ethnic, class, or national affiliations. Furthermore, the notion of a globalectic reading suggests that we can establish connections between situations, albeit distant in context.

With this in mind, we could identify several historical processes that place Spanish American contemporary realists and their Hispanic African counterparts in a parallel geopolitical location. At first sight, these two regions share a Spanish colonial past. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these spaces have experienced the economic intervention of the United States. Furthermore, we find that some colonial practices used to control people of certain ethnic

or social groups have persisted in the dynamics of the modern states of Latin America and Africa.

### ***Homeboys: Undraping the Farce of National Belonging in Equatorial Guinea***

While the first two plays observed have dealt with internal forms of domination that keep racial and social groups in their place, the following Equatorial Guinean drama goes on to address the issues posed by global domination while fostering local community building solutions. Similar to Cardoso and Duncan, Juan Tomas Avila Laurel (1966–) has combined a literary career with political activism. A nurse by training and an editor and cultural promoter during his tenure at the Spanish Cultural Center in Malabo, Avila Laurel has increasingly gained recognition outside of Equatorial Guinea both as a writer and activist. *Homeboys* (1992), one of Avila Laurel's early works, clearly shows the prodemocracy agenda that has come to define the rest his oeuvre. In fact, this play also carries the distinction of being the first Equatorial Guinean drama that presents a direct criticism of Teodoro Obiang, in power since 1979. While earlier poetry, essays, and narratives written by Equatorial Guinean writers in exile had been openly critical of dictatorial regimes of the national eras, dramatic writings created inside of the country—due to censorship—had showed only implicit criticism. Conversely, the critique presented in *Homeboys* is not only limited to local politics; it also conveys a deeper criticism of relations of power that extends beyond the national realm into global politics.

Published before the 1995 discovery of large oil reserves in Equatorial Guinea, *Homeboys* does not address the dual process by which over the last twenty years this nation has become one of Africa's major oil producers and its president, Teodoro Obiang, one of the richest men in Africa. With its realistic depiction of the daily situation of Equatorial Guineans during the early 1990s, however, this play constitutes a valuable point of reference for contrasting the shape of state institutions and living conditions before and after the oil boom. As of 2015, the results of the comparison show little improvement, if any.

At first glance, *Homeboys* describes the issues of poverty, impunity, and failed institutions that defined the reality of the country in the 1980s and early 1990s. A second look at this seven-scene play unveils the state's strategies that effectively control and even paralyze the actions of the population in Equatorial Guinea. At the core of the power relations represented in

the play are the practices of nepotism and corruption. To start, these are visible in the ethnic divide between the Fangs of Mongomo (the hometown of the president) and the rest of the national ethnic groups, including other members of the Fang ethnicity, the Bubis, the Ndowes, the Creoles, the Bengas, and the Annobonese (Avila Laurel's group). As the play begins, we find a humble and crowded home inhabited by Irgundio, a Fang from Mongomo, with his wife, his children, his two brothers, and their respective families. The description of fights between family members, who are made desperate by the lack of opportunity to find their own homes, reveals a more profound problem: the extended situation of crisis across a population that lives in poverty with a general sense of uncertainty. Impunity is another issue posed by Avila Laurel in this play. By the second scene, we learn that Irgundio has displaced another family in order to occupy the house where he and his extended family live. The rightful owners, from another ethnic group, have been evicted thanks to Irgundio's connections in the government. The son of the previously dispossessed family knocks at the door, oblivious to the fact that his parents have been ejected from their home. Shocked, he has a hostile encounter with Irgundio:

IRGUNDIO. (*Coge unos papeles que están en unos cajones.*) ¿Ves, chico, estos papeles? Toma, léelos y así sabrás de quién es la casa. ¿Cómo crees que un funcionario del gobierno estará en la calle mientras que un borrachero está disfrutando de la casa? Además, no pagaba . . .

EL JOVEN. Sea lo que fuera, estoy seguro de que pagaba. Además, yo conozco a muchos que deben más de dos años y no pagaban, no porque carezcan de dinero sino porque llevan marca en la cara. No se les toca: pero a otros, basta que deban dos meses para que . . .

IRGUNDIO. (*Irritado*) ¡Salte! ¡Salte de mi casa! Así sois los que salís de España. Así habláis de política para que luego digáis que os persiguen porque habéis estudiado, cuando no sabéis nada. ¡Toma! (*Coge su maleta y lo echa.*) Vete a buscar a tus padres y déjame, que no me quiero enfadar. (174)

IRGUNDIO. (*Takes some papers out of a drawer.*) See these papers, boy? Come on, take them and read them and you will find out who owns this house. How can you even think that a bureaucrat would be homeless while there is a drunk enjoying this place?

Besides, he missed several payments . . .

THE YOUNG MAN. Whatever! I am sure that he paid. Besides, I know many people who owe more than two years of payments, and that it is not because they don't have money, but because they have a mark on their faces . . .

IRGUNDIO. (*Upset*): Get out! Get out of my house! You are just like all those who return from Spain. You talk politics so that you can complain that they are after you because you have studied . . . but you know nothing. Take this! (*Takes his suitcase and pushes him out.*) Go and look for your parents and leave me alone. I don't want to get upset.

By referring to the “mark on their faces” the young man brings attention to the privileges enjoyed by the Fang of the village of Mongomo and, consequently, to the nepotism practiced by the regime. Furthermore, this character returning from Spain also introduces another dimension, namely, that of the Equatorial Guinean dependence on foreign aid. For many Equatoguineans during the 1980s and 1990s, one of the few options for obtaining an education was through scholarships funded by the Spanish Government Cooperation Agency (AECID).

By pointing to the international aid made available to the population, *Homeboys* also reveals the juxtaposition of state politics with international politics. This becomes more evident in the following scene when Proculo, one of Irgundio's brothers, suffers a mysterious illness, which propels a set of arguments and worry among family members. After some debate, the sickly brother is taken to a witch who is unable to cure him. This situation frames the appearance of Frantz Weber, a European physician working for the humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders. As the doctor assesses Proculo's symptoms, the patient explains that he works for the National Radio as a news anchor and that he has been suffering from acute headaches after work. Frantz asks to read the news that Proculo delivers at the radio and states:

FRANTZ. Estas informaciones son falsas; con la repetición diaria de ellas por la radio, crea en un sujeto sensible una repulsa o aversión a unas versiones que de antemano conoce como contrarias a la realidad. Eso le puede hacer enfermar y hasta morir. (182)

FRANTZ. This news is false; its daily repetition on the radio creates in a sensitive

individual, who knows well that this news is contrary to reality, a repulsion or aversion. This situation can make him sick, and even cause him death.

Frantz's openly critical comment on the regime irritates Irgundio so much that he takes the Luxembourgian doctor to a traditional judge, who, in turn, decides to forward the case to the military police. At the police station, Frantz faces charges of intervening in domestic politics and hears over and over that the president is "the defender of the supreme power" (190). Astonished and irritated by the outrageous accusations and by the cult to the president's figure, the doctor defends himself with certain arrogance, pointing to Africa's underdevelopment and dependence on Europe. During his interview with Lieutenant Melchor at the police station, Frantz asserts:

FRANTZ. Mire usted, hace cinco siglos que ya se hablaba de democracia en Europa, mientras que apenas había estados en África sino una mezcolanza de pueblos. Como ya le dije, la civilización actual habla el europeo.

MELCHOR. Cada país es el dueño de su destino, por eso, no hay nada que justifique la injerencia en . . .

FRANTZ. Perdone, no sólo usted, sino la mayoría de las autoridades africanas apelan a la injerencia en los asuntos internos, ¿pero qué es lo que llaman asuntos internos? Este país, y lo digo sólo para citar un ejemplo, pertenece a la ONU y por eso recibe ayuda de cualquier organismo dependiente de la ONU, como es la OMS, la UNICEF y otros. Anualmente cada país tercermundista pide y recibe ayuda por valor de muchísimos millones de dólares. (190-91)

FRANTZ. Look, people were already discussing democracy in Europe five centuries ago; back then, there were just seminal states in Africa along with a mish-mash of peoples. As I already said, civilization currently speaks European.

MELCHOR. Each country is the owner of its destiny; therefore, there is nothing that justifies the interference in . . .

FRANTZ. Excuse me, not only you, but the authorities of most African countries object to interference in internal affairs. But what exactly do you mean by internal affairs? This country, and I say this just to cite one example, is a member of the UN and,

therefore, receives help from all the UN's agencies, such as WHO, UNICEF, and others. Every year, every single third-world country asks for and receives help worth millions of dollars.

Frantz's response highlights the disconnect between the Equatorial Guinean government's request for help to care for its people and its demand for no intervention despite a lack of transparency in national politics. Predictably, his words are interpreted by the police as an open act of offense to the national government, which prompts the doctor's incarceration. This scene, however, directs the reader's attention to the conflict in the European discourse about Africa that, on the one hand, offers humanitarian help while, on the other hand, does little to prompt change in that continent's circumstances. Ambiguities like these have resulted in global hierarchies of wealth and labor distribution in the current global economy. As Ramón Grosfoguel, attending to the conceptual model advanced by Latin American thinkers Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and Walter Mignolo, explains: "We went from the sixteenth century characterization of 'people without writing' to the eighteenth and nineteenth-century characterization of 'people without history,' to the twentieth-century characterization of 'people without development,' and more recently, to the early twenty-first-century of 'people without democracy.'"

Frantz's lecture on Africa's reliance on European aid makes clear that Avila Laurel's critique of power relations extends to global politics as well. At the same time, *Homeboys* looks deep inside the silenced opinions of Equatorial Guineans to suggest that, despite being located on the periphery, the inhabitants of that country wish to have a working democracy. The play, however, also indicates the factors that silence and restrict citizen action. This aspect is shown in the scene previous to the visit to the police station, when Irgundio first took Frantz to the traditional judge. In doing this, Irgundio was following the constitutional rules that claim to honor Bantu traditions by assigning judges or "chiefs" in different neighborhoods to take care of familial issues. Since Irgundio also presented charges of adultery against Frantz (with no apparent reason), his case qualified as a domestic problem. It is noteworthy that the visit to the chief reveals how even this character, a tenant of tradition, is discontent with the current status quo. In spite of his fear of the government, the chief shares his opinion with his secretary after he has forwarded Irgundio's case to the police:

JEFE. Si resulta que después de nuestras acciones el asunto llega al Presidente o al embajador del país al que pertenece el blanco, los sicarios querrán lavarse las manos y vendrán por mí. ¿Sabes lo que pasaría si se informara por una emisora extranjera que un jefe tradicional multó y expulsó a un súbdito de donde sea?; las autoridades de este país harían como si nunca tiraron una piedra.

SECRETARIO. Eso es verdad. Por eso los blancos tienen tanta cara. Son como ciudadanos superiores. . . . Este país será peor que Sudáfrica si la cosa no cambia.

JEFE. Este país se hundirá si no salimos a la calle a pedir el cambio.

SECRETARIO. ¿Crees que no nos balearán si lo hacemos? En este país está prohibida la huelga.

JEFE. No sólo la huelga. También se prohíbe la charla, la danza e incluso se prohíbe vivir.

CHIEF. You don't understand. If it happens that after our actions, the case reaches the ears of the president or the ambassador of the white man's country, the mercenaries would want to wash their hands of it and come after me. Do you know what would happen if they were to transmit on a foreign radio station that a traditional chief charged and banned one of his own? The authorities of that country would act as if they had never thrown a stone.

SECRETARY. This country will be worse than South Africa if things do not change.

CHIEF. This country will go down if we do not get out in the streets to demand a change.

SECRETARY. Do you think they would shoot us if we try? Strikes are prohibited in this country.

CHIEF. Not only strikes. They also prohibit conversations, dancing, and even living.

This dialogue acknowledges the state's violence over the population and the extreme discontent of the people. Moreover, it calls attention to the fact that the government paradoxically presents itself as protector of traditions but is in reality more a protector of foreign interests in the national

territory. To be sure, the fact that the chief suggests a protest signals what is needed: a negotiation of tradition and modernity.

By delving into local politics (ethnic divisions, corruption, and disrespect for traditions) within the framework of global dynamics, *Homeboys* portrays the competing economic, ethnic, national, and cultural forces that effectively control and even paralyze the actions of the population in Equatorial Guinea. The “scenario of becoming” in this drama, rather than portraying transgressive actions, consists in the realistic depiction of the elements that determine the national circumstance. Thus, the drama strives to pose questions that give a sense of order to a seemingly chaotic situation.

## **Challenging Power Structures in Realist Afro-Hispanic Drama from Latin America and Africa**

The three plays analyzed above convey a systematic way of looking at the particular characteristics of power relations that have resulted in the subjugation of specific communities. This approach includes realistic descriptions of contexts, peoples, and practices, and it delves into different ways in which certain groups can be differentiated and systematically marginalized. In Cardoso’s play, the very moment of the Afro-Uruguayans’ eviction from their homes constitutes the framework with which to address the multiple ways in which black Uruguayans have been excluded. His drama also pays homage to Candombe’s power to foster solidarity and spiritual resistance. In Duncan’s play, the tragic ending to Morado’s dream of social mobility highlights the entrenched power relations surrounding social differences in Costa Rica and the intersection of economic class and cultural affiliations therein. Lastly, Avila Laurel’s play delves into the violence delivered by a neocolonial regime that defends the interests of the few and relies on the deformation of traditional practices, a strategy that results in the identity crisis plaguing the population in Equatorial Guinea.<sup>12</sup>

Seen side by side, the plays by Cardoso, Duncan, and Avila Laurel respond effectively to the problems posed by national and global structures of power, which go from corruption and

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<sup>12</sup> For a study on the idea of tradition in Equatorial Guinea’s official cultural politics, see Rizo (2009 and 2010).

nepotism to capitalist classism and homogenizing discourses of identity. Thus, Afro-Hispanic realist drama calls for a truly cosmopolitan engagement beyond local or national boundaries. Furthermore, the realistic style presented by these dramatists urges an understanding of the specificities of local circumstances within a global context as an alternative to seeing them through external, master narratives which only provide deranged images of their communities' situations. Pertaining to a literary tradition with longstanding poetics of resistance, realist Afro-Hispanic contemporary drama, at least as shown in these three plays, emerges as a model for critically reading an established world order.

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