

## Rewriting the Other: Manuel Zapata Olivella's *¡Levántate mulato!*

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*As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others...For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man... Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him.*

*The black man among his own in the twentieth century does not know at what moment his inferiority comes into being through the other.*

--Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

The notion of a fragmented identity has been a recurring theme throughout the African Diaspora. In the United States, for example, W.E.B. DuBois theorized double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), and in his treatise on the Black psyche, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Frantz Fanon looked to the Francophone Caribbean and Africa to speak of the notion of “inferiority.” In Spanish America Manuel Zapata Olivella, Colombian author, psychiatrist and anthropologist, participates in this discourse in his autobiography *¡Levántate mulato!* (1988), where he questions and challenges the legitimacy of the imposition of labels and Othering by mainstream society. It is noteworthy that all three intellectuals speak of the same phenomenon using different metaphors, whether double consciousness, inferiority or, as Zapata Olivella defines the experience, seeing oneself through the “European mirror.” As many scholars have noted, the idea is that Blacks are forced to see themselves through the eyes of another, a legacy of both slavery and colonization that inevitably leads to a distorted view of self as one tries or is forced to mold oneself within the hegemonic vision of national identity. The process of defining the national image leads to the dislocation and alienation of the colonial subject from his past, as he is forced to look to the colonial power to define himself within this image, an image that never accurately or faithfully portrays the Other. This process of looking and not truly seeing is further complicated in many Latin American countries where people tend to embrace ideologies of *mestizaje* (racial mixture) or racial democracy, where the question of race is suppressed in order to put forth an image of racial and national unity.

In a society that embraces the ideology of *mestizaje*, Zapata Olivella acknowledges his racial hybridity, but at the same time he is acutely aware of the original meanings of the

term *mestizo*: bastard, illegitimate. This illegitimacy is what is reflected back to him as he gazes into the mirror, ever cognizant of the continued derision of his “oppressed bloods,” his African and aboriginal heritages. Zapata Olivella sets out to break this “European mirror” and redefine himself on his own terms, thus doing away with illegitimate visions of people of color in Spanish America and contesting false notions of his “oppressed bloods.” His two travel narratives, *Pasión vagabunda* (1949) and *He visto la noche* (1953), as well as his autobiography *¡Levántate mulato!*, which revisits and expands upon the two travel accounts, all serve as an arena to contest Othering and undercut racial discourse by reevaluating and validating both African and indigenous heritages within a Colombian national context. Zapata Olivella’s works contribute to an important body of Diasporic literature that relocates and redefines self as a subject rather than an object, and rejects “Othering” by engaging predominant racial discourses and vindicating Blackness within the national image. His work opens a forum for racial theorizing in a Caribbean and Latin American context that contradicts or questions ideas of racial democracy and *mestizaje*.

### *¡Levántate mulato!*

The two travel narratives *Pasión vagabunda* and *He visto la noche*, which also form a great part of his autobiography, *¡Levántate mulato!*, delineate Zapata Olivella’s early travels and investigations into Western conceptions of Blackness and identity, and reflect his continual pondering of racial identity, in a newly proffered tri-ethnic terminology. Zapata Olivella addresses questions of choice in racial identity by setting out to discover and redefine self, while at the same time he challenges mulattos, as well as people of African and aboriginal descent, to proudly accept their Black (and/or aboriginal) identity.

*¡Levántate mulato!* reflects the author’s reconstruction of race in Colombia based largely on his travels in Latin America, the United States and Africa, and his anthropological studies of class and race in Colombia. The autobiography demonstrates and reflects the knowledge gained through his travels both inside and outside of Colombia, and is his arena for developing a revised Colombian racial discourse. Although he looks to the United States and Africa as sites for gaining racial and cultural literacy, he discards North American and African polarized conceptions of Blackness, and uses his racial-political consciousness gained during his travels to reformulate ideas of race in Spanish America. Zapata Olivella, while not completely rejecting ideas of *mestizaje*, restructures the idea of the *mestizo* by critiquing and reformulating earlier notions of *mestizaje* developed during the colonial and independence periods. His reconstruction of the *mestizo* image is of a tri-ethnic (versus bi-racial) identity that includes Spanish colonial ancestry along with its aboriginal and African counterparts, giving preference to the latter two who shared a history of oppression and subjugation to colonial Spanish rule and later to *criollo* rule. His desire to define himself in new terms by reworking old terminology (i.e. *mestizaje*) is intertwined with *negritud*, a movement that strove to redefine conceptions of Blackness and stressed pride in Black heritage.

Zapata Olivella speculates on the meaning of *negritud* in the Americas, oftentimes based in negative perceptions: “En América la palabra negritud tiene sus propias resonancias:

*negro, indio, razas pigmentadas e impuras, silver roll, black, nigger, etc.* Así lo comprobé en mi país desde la infancia y fue el repetido estigma de los racistas contra el indio, el mulato, el zambo y aún para el blanco sin pergaminos” (329). Zapata Olivella strives to redefine existing definitions of *negritud* in his homeland by embracing other ideas of Negritud, such as those introduced in 1947 by the Martiniquen poet Aimé Césaire, which denote the positive features of Blackness among people classified as, or self-identifying as “Black.”

Negritud en América es indianidad, africanitud, americanidad, todas las connotaciones que quiera dársele menos el de colonización: doblez, mimetismo, castración, alienación, imitación. La negritud, conciencia del violentado, del rechazado, del heroísmo y la resistencia total, nació en América en la flecha envenenada del Caribe, en la palabra insumisa de todos los indios, en la defensa de la mujer y la tierra, sean cuales fueren el origen, la etnia y la cultura del colonizador [... ] América se hizo negra por la fusión de las sangres llamadas impuras. El mestizaje igualó biológicamente a la India y a la negra con su violador blanco. Desde entonces la mezcla de las sangres fue superior a la pureza racial proclamada por los conquistadores. (329-30)

Zapata Olivella’s definition of *negritud* reflects the Colombian nationalist ideology of *mestizaje*, which defines Colombians not in terms of race but in terms of mixture, often referred to as racial democracy.<sup>1</sup> This redefinition of *mestizaje* is how Zapata Olivella begins his autobiography, calling the readers’ attention to his purpose in writing: to reevaluate and vindicate the people of aboriginal and African ancestry in Colombia.

From the beginning of the autobiography, Zapata Olivella defines himself in terms of a tri-ethnic identity by expounding upon his tri-racial heritage. While he acknowledges his Catalan ancestry in a rather peripheral manner, the first few chapters of the autobiography focus on his indigenous and African heritages. His explorations of the customs and traditions of his ancestors passed down through the generations is a revision of historical perceptions of the indigenous and African peoples in Colombia. Zapata Olivella undertakes the task of rewriting the history of the indigenous and African peoples in Colombia (and Latin America in general), based upon his own identity crisis that he suffered under what he calls the “European mirror:” “Influido por estas lecturas, mi rostro oscuro no podía mirarse sin miedo en el espejo del conquistador europeo” (18). His notion of the “European mirror” reflects very closely Du Bois’ concept of double-consciousness and what Frantz Fanon termed “being for others,” the idea of seeing oneself through the eyes of one’s oppressor.<sup>2</sup> Zapata Olivella translates this concept into the Colombian context by complicating the idea of double-consciousness into a multi-dimensional, multi-consciousness paradigm. As Zapata Olivella states in his introduction the ideas of hybridity and mixture enforced feelings of inferiority to those of non-European descent:

Para entonces, ya tenía veinte años y plena conciencia de mi hibridez. Pero este convencimiento me despertaba angustiosas respuestas. Los términos mestizo, bastardo, mulato, zambo, tan despreciados en la historia y sociedad americanas,

me reclamaban una actitud consecuente conmigo mismo, con mi sangre, con mis ancestros. (17)

His inclusion of the term “bastardo,” or bastard, with the other racial terms suggests Zapata Olivella’s idea of conflicted identity and seeing oneself through the eyes of Europeans. Although the term *mestizo* was originally used to mean half-Spanish and half-Indian, it was often used to mean “illegitimate” or “bastard,” and eventually came to represent the entire mixed population regardless of the degree of mixture.<sup>3</sup> *Mestizo* then takes on a double meaning – of mixed ancestry and illegitimate. As Zapata Olivella speculates, both aborigines and Africans began to see themselves through the eyes of Europeans and gradually internalized these negative notions.

For example, the portrayal of aborigines in foundational fictions such *Martín Fierro* and *María* is laden with images of savagery and barbarity, and early and foundational fictions often portrayed Africans with even less favor. Africans were portrayed, according to Zapata Olivella, as having “tainted” the purity of the aborigine, “con el crudo y viviente influjo de su barbarie” (17-18). Africans were looked upon as savage and uncivilized, and were purposely omitted from the history books of many Western nations, and their contributions to the new nations were seen only in terms of the manual labor they provided during slavery. In short, Blacks were not looked upon as founding figures in the new nations.

Zapata Olivella revises these images of aborigines and Blacks in his three works, most especially in his autobiography, filling in previous omissions of their contributions to society and nation, as well as celebrating the cultural legacy of both peoples in Colombia, and in so doing he sets out to vindicate the oppressed, as seen in his questions at the beginning of *¡Levántate mulato!*: “¿Híbrido o Nuevo hombre? ¿Soy realmente un traidor a mi raza? ¿Un zambo escurridizo? ¿Un mulato entreguista? O sencillamente un mestizo americano que busca defender la identidad de sus sangres oprimidas” (21). His toying with terminology used to describe different mixtures of races, (e.g. a zambo is someone of Black and indigenous ancestry), represents his attempt to redefine identity with a tri-ethnic vocabulary, and at the same time rescue the terms *mestizo* and *mulatto* from their negative connotations. He is at once zambo, mulatto (Black and white), and mestizo (white and aborigine). There are three facets to his racial identity, and none of the readily used terminology encompasses this mixture adequately. Although he delineates all three components of his ancestry, he centers his treatment on the aboriginal and most specifically on the African, thereby rejecting ideas such as *blanqueamiento* or whitening, ideas that privilege whiteness that are still very prevalent in modern Colombia, by focusing on his “oppressed blood.”<sup>4</sup>

His purpose in writing his autobiography, however, is not simply to focus on any particular phase or aspect of his own life, but rather to contribute to the discourse on identity and to call attention to the continuing oppression of certain sectors of Colombian and Latin American society. Part of Zapata Olivella’s project is to revamp the understanding of the history of racial mixing in Latin America by stressing the fact that *mestizaje* was the result not of tolerance but of sexual violence during conquest and

colonization. Zapata Olivella is adamant that both *mestizos* and mulattos accept their non-European heritages as an integral part of their identities.

His journeys throughout the Americas, and most especially to the United States, as well as to Africa, and his interactions with racially politicized groups play a key role in his redefinition of Colombian [Latin American] racial identity. It is in the United States that he first confronts overt racism and where we see most clearly his negotiations of a newly defined racial identity, as seen in *He visto la noche*. In Africa, on the other hand, which he portrays in *¡Levántate mulato!*, he discovers that the idea of “returning home,” or undertaking the reverse middle passage back to Africa, is unnecessary, as Africa does not offer answers to Blacks in the Western hemisphere who are searching for a redefined racial and cultural identity.

### ***Mestizaje* Redefined**

Zapata Olivella’s greater awareness of his racial identity comes about in great part due to his travels that begin as a young man when he first leaves home in Lorica for medical school in Bogotá. It is in Bogotá that he first becomes aware of the “invisible” racist barriers that keep Blacks and aborigines out of positions of prestige and political power. Although he is a mulatto, in Bogotá he recognizes that he is considered “el negro” [the Black], although in predominately Black areas of the country he might be light enough to be considered “white,” and also that those barriers apply to him as well as other Blacks despite his education or economic status (178). In response to his raising racial consciousness, he joins other students to protest racism and call for the equitable treatment of Blacks in the United States and elsewhere and to celebrate the “día del negro” (187). His adoption of the term Black for himself is met with surprise and scoffing from other students:

Las actitudes asumidas por mí y mi hermana Delia, afirmando nuestra identidad, constituían duras lecciones. A partir de las miradas burlonas y sorprendidas de las jóvenes a nuestro paso, fuimos descubriendo las cerradas de puerta, los comentarios elogiosos pero ineficaces cuando se trataba de cambiar los rígidos esquemas de la sociedad discriminadora. (178)

This surprise is due in part, no doubt, to the fact that Black is usually a term reserved for those of unmixed or scarcely mixed heritage, most especially Blacks who live in the coastal regions, and the term often carries pejorative connotations.<sup>5</sup>

Zapata Olivella’s racial awareness continues to grow, sparking his decision to investigate firsthand the effects of racism in the Americas. As he states:

De golpe las ideas políticas entraron de lleno en mi concepción revolucionaria de la medicina. Desde entonces dejé de ver los pacientes como simples víctimas de bacterias, conejillos de laboratorio y anfiteatros. El enfermo era también, y más frecuentemente, una víctima social. El virus inoculado por el profesor me compulsaría a buscar la etiología de la enfermedad más allá de los laboratorios. La crisis haría explosión cuando decidido a conocer la sociedad americana que

gestaba a los enfermos –el feudalismo y las dictaduras militares- abandoné la universidad para recorrer a pie los caminos de Centro América, contaminado por la fiebre de los grandes vagabundos... (LM 182-3)

With the determination to make the world his classroom, he sets out to study the social causes for infirmities: poverty, discrimination, feudalism, etc. He travels throughout Central America and the United States, observing and interacting with indigenous, Black and mestizo populations, all of which is chronicled in the travel narratives and touched upon in his autobiography. His ultimate goal is to reach the Jim Crow South of the United States, where he not only observes racist practices in some of their most nefarious forms, but he also evolves as an activist.

While in the United States Zapata Olivella resides with various ethnic groups, and in his interactions with these groups we witness his multi-faceted, negotiable identity as he alternately identifies himself according to his circumstances. He at times identifies himself racially as black, referring to African Americans as “mis hermanos de raza;” culturally as Latin American when he is in contact with other Latin Americans, and at times he identifies himself in terms of nationality, as Colombian. His plural identity allows him to identify in numerous ways, maneuvering and manipulating his identities, usually in response to discrimination or as a means of maneuvering within the US system of racialization. What comes from these encounters is a surge of racial and cultural pride, a further coming to consciousness, and a reinforcement of his dedication to resistance and even, at times, militancy.

In 1974, years after traveling in the United States, Zapata Olivella received an invitation to attend a Pan-African conference in Dakar convoked by then president Léopold Senghor. The conference was to address questions of *negritud* (both artistic and Africanity) in post-colonial Africa and the Americas, and Zapata Olivella looked on it as an opportunity for Afro-Latin Americans to redefine themselves within the vision of Africa in the Americas (334-35). What he encountered, though, was a rejection on the part of many Africans of people of mixed heritage. Only those with little or no racial mixture were considered to be “Black,” an idea that dramatically contrasted the acceptance of notions of *mestizaje* prevalent in Latin America.

During his trip to Africa Zapata Olivella encountered resistance on the part of many Africans to his attempts to identify with them both racially and culturally. For some of the African people with whom he had contact, racial mixing was viewed as yet another form of racial and cultural “suicide.” For Zapata Olivella and others who formed part of the *negritud* movement Africa was represented as a site of cultural heritage, but was often portrayed in contradictory terms. For example, Africa was oftentimes envisioned as a primitive place in its representation as the site of Black nascence. African American intellectuals and artists, such as Langston Hughes, as well as Afro-Antilleans journeyed to Africa but often found that they were mistaken in their essentialized and romanticized notions of Africa and Africans. Similarly, Zapata Olivella has a romanticized notion of Africa, as seen in his description of his first impressions: “Africa convertida en un puño

fuerte golpeaba día y noche mi corazón como si fuera un viejo tambor, probado para resistir sus puños” (336).

Zapata Olivella’s idealized vision of African unity, the idea that he will share an automatic solidarity with Africans, and of a shared cultural heritage is soon lost, due in great part to some of the African’s refusal to look at people of mixed heritage as equally “African,” and the polarized vision of race in terms of Black and white that he encounters among many of the Africans. Zapata Olivella finds himself very much a foreigner in Africa, rather than a “lost child” returning home. His experiences in Africa lead him to reevaluate his earlier conceptions of *negritud*, and he in turn embraces more fully his tri-ethnic conception of *mestizaje*. We sense a certain anger or disgust in his remembrance of Africa, as he unhesitatingly reminds his reader of the colonial legacy within the African continent, something the Africans that he encountered were remiss to acknowledge. Hence, the rejection is mutual. Although he still feels solidarity with Africans, Zapata Olivella no longer looks to Africa as the answer to understanding and defining the racial and cultural heritage of Africans in the Americas:

La historia de los desmembramientos de Africa, escuchada en las múltiples lenguas que hablaban mis hermanos, reafirmó mi decisión de convocar en América... un escenario, una gran ágora de los negros de América cualesquiera que fuesen los idiomas colonizadores, donde tuvieran su lugar los hermanos de Africa y de todos aquellos continentes a donde se extendió y floreció su semilla...nos reunimos por vez primera en la historia de nuestros pueblos a debatir el problema de la cultura negra en las Américas con la mirada descolonizadora que nos hermanaba y unía. (340)

Instead he turns his eyes to Latin America to redefine itself within its post-colonial context. After his experiences in the US, and later in Africa, Zapata Olivella is better able to redefine his conceptions of *mestizaje* and Black identity, rejecting the idea of looking to Africa as the primary site of cultural heritage of the Diaspora. Zapata Olivella recognizes the link to Africa, but also acknowledges the need to look to the Americas as the new home of Afro-Americans and it is in the Americas where people of African descent have to (re)define themselves. In 1978, four years after the conference in Dakar, Zapata Olivella presided over a meeting of people of African descent in Cali, Colombia, the First Congress of Black Culture of the Americas. During this congress, as well as during a second, which took place in Panama City (1981), Zapata Olivella and other intellectuals, artists, cultural and political figures met to denounce racism and discriminatory practices that continue to exist in the Americas.

Zapata Olivella’s journey is not simply a process of “discovering” a Black identity, but is rather an attempt to construct a new Colombian identity, based in great part on newly redefined conceptions of Blackness, racial pride, resistance and militancy. The plural identity that he employs in the United States as a means of resistance –where he is at once and alternately Colombian, Afro-Colombian and Latin American—also reflects his developing discourse of racialization, which he would later advocate in Colombia.

Zapata Olivella's coming to consciousness, described in detail in his travel narratives, is perhaps best demonstrated in *¡Levántate mulato!*, which synthesizes his travels and subsequent negotiations of both his racial and political identities as he encounters other systems of racialization and conceptions of racial identity. His shift from idealizations of African and African American cultures to a deeper, more mature understanding of the politics of race that he later applies to a Latin American context demonstrates marked development in his evolution as an intellectual and activist. His travels to the United States and Africa contribute in great part to Zapata Olivella's revision of *mestizaje*. The United States did not answer all of his questions concerning racial identity, as Zapata Olivella discovered the polarized system of race to be too limiting to be translated to a Spanish American perspective. His trip to Africa, on the other hand, led to the debunking of the myth of the return "home" embraced by many *negritud* writers and Black intellectuals of the early to mid-twentieth century, such as Aimé Césaire. In Africa Zapata Olivella realizes that he is not in fact African, and that the pilgrimage to the "homeland" does not offer the solution in the quest to defining self. In the end, as described in his autobiography, Zapata Olivella discovers that there is no need to look outside of Latin America to establish one's identity.

Peoples of the African Diaspora find themselves at a unique moment in history with the ability to redefine Afro-Americans, culturally and politically, and Zapata Olivella adds an important voice to the process with his writings which reflect what he terms "the rebellious spirit of the ancestors" (341). Zapata Olivella contributes not only to the expanding list of Diaspora autobiography with *¡Levántate mulato!*, but his travel narratives, *Pasión vagabunda* and *He visto la noche* contribute to an often unrecognized Afro-American tradition of travel literature. He belongs to a tradition, not of exploration and conquest, but of the quest to relocate and redefine self as a subject rather than object or "Other;" and of engaging predominant racial discourses and attempting to redefine and valorize Blackness within the national image.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that Zapata Olivella clearly points out that practices of miscegenation were not based on love or affectionate relationships, but was a continual process of sexual violation by the Europeans against the indigenous peoples, and later Africans. This idea of violation is key to his call for mulattos and *mestizos* to move away from Eurocentric notions of *mestizaje* and to embrace their aboriginal and African heritages.

<sup>2</sup> As Fanon states, "As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others... For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man... The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man" (Fanon 110).

<sup>3</sup> See F. James Davis' *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* for a history and summary of the use of terms for different racial groups in the Americas.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Wade has written several important studies about Blacks and the notion of blackness in Colombia, including, *Black....* In which he writes about the continued privileging of whiteness through ideologies of *mestizaje*.

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Blackness in Colombia, see Peter Wade, "The Language of Race, Place and Nation in Colombia" *America Negra* December 1991, no. 2, (41-65). and Nina S. de Friedemann, "Negros en Colombia: Identidad e Invisibilidad" *America Negra*, June 1992, no. 3, (25-35).

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