



¡MANTECA!

AN ANTHOLOGY OF
AFRO-LATIN@ POETS

EDITED BY
MELISSA CASTILLO-GARSOW

“¡Manteca!, like its English translation, “butter,” will melt delectably in the mind, creating flavors and nuances to ponder again and again.” —Booklist

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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DEDICATION

To all the poets who made this book possible but were not able to see its completion. They live on in these pages and in future generations of Afro-Latin@ poets.

Tato Laviera

(May 9, 1950–November 1, 2013)

Pedro Pietri

(March 21, 1944–March 3, 2004)

Miguel Gómez Piñero

(December 19, 1946–June 16, 1988)

Louis Reyes Rivera

(May 19, 1945–March 2, 2012)

Lorenzo Thomas

(August 31, 1944–July 4, 2005)

y

Juan Flores

(September 29, 1943–December 2, 2014), whose life and scholarship inspired this anthology.

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I still remember that first email I got from Nicolás Kanellos at Arte Público Press. I came to him with a proposal and a list of poets and he just got it, perhaps even more than I did. Most importantly, I am honored that he took a chance on an inexperienced graduate student, saw my abilities and took the time to guide me through this process.

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To my mother, siempre, to my mother. I would be nothing without you.

Introduction

¡Manteca!: An Anthology of Afro-Latin@ Poets

the internal dance of salsa
is of course plena
and permit me to say these words
in afro-spanish:
la bomba y la plena puro son
de Puerto Rico que Ismael es el
rey y es el juez
meaning the same as marvin gaye
singing spiritual social songs
to black awareness
“the salsa of bethesda fountain,”
—Tato Laviera

In 1947, Dizzy Gillespie, Chano Pozo and Gil Fuller collaborated on the song “Manteca.” “Manteca” would not only become one of Gillespie’s most famous recordings but it is one of the foundations of Afro-Cuban jazz. As such, “Manteca” not only represents the significance of African American and Latin@ collaborations, but the beginnings of what can be thought of as a distinct Afro-Latin@ sound in the United States that can be traced through boogaloo to salsa to hip hop. Perhaps, it should not be surprising that many of the first generation of Afro-Latin@ poets within these pages, such as Pedro Pietri, Louis Reyes Rivera,

Miguel Algarín, Sandra María Esteves and Lorenzo Thomas were born within a few years of this song. Although Afro-Latin@s have a much longer history in the United States than just “Manteca,” it represents for the first time a period in which Afro-Latin@s had their own recognizable sound and music. And so when, for example, the great Louis Reyes Rivera passed in 2012, that second generation of Afro-Latin@ poets he mentored, such as Tony Medina and Shaggy Flores, honored him with that same *sentido*. As Medina wrote then, and I echo to the other poets who have passed and to whom this volume is dedicated, “I can hear you now shouting out at us from the Spirit World—MANTECA!!!!!!!!!!!!”¹ Thus this title, like the anthology, represents spirit and history but also an Afro-Latin@ soul that is not really describable. It is felt distinctly and differently by each poet and in each page. For this reason this introduction will not attempt to define what Afro-Latin@ poetry is, but instead presents those poets whose words represent the diversity of Latino América.

In their introduction to the *Afro-Latin@ Reader*, the first major academic effort about Latin@s of African descent in the United States, editors Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores struggle to define the term Afro-Latin@², asking within a North American context, “What’s an Afro-Latin@? Who is an Afro-Latin@? The term befuddles us because we are accustomed to thinking of ‘Afro’ and ‘Latin@’ as distinct from each other and mutually exclusive: one is either Black or Latin@” (1). In his poem “the salsa of Bethesda fountain,” Tato Laviera answers some of these questions. He describes Afro-Latinidad as having its own language, composed both of Puerto Rican and African American musical traditions. For Laviera, being Afro-Latin@ is also a self-proclamation, a self-awareness of cultural and linguistic mixings, that make up every day existence:

a blackness in spanish
a blackness in english
mixture-met on jam sessions in central park
there were no differences in
the sounds emerging from inside
soul-salsa is universal
meaning a rhythm of mixtures
with world-wide bases.

As the poem continues, it becomes clear that this self-identification as Afro-Latin@ is at once a personal statement as well as a commentary that has transnational implications. As Laviera finishes the poem he demands acceptance and recognition not just from those who are visibly Afro-Latin@, or who identify themselves as Afro-Latin@, but as a non-negotiable part of *Latinidad* both in Puerto Rico and Central Park: “did you want it stronger?” he rhetorically asks? “well, okay, it is a root called Africa in all of us.”

Jiménez Román and Flores’ questions demonstrate how the term “Afro-Latin@” brings up a complicated series of issues, including race, nationality, ethnicity, heritage and ancestry that manifest themselves distinctly among Latin America’s varied countries and cultures and then travel, mix and create new uncertainties for those who find themselves in the United States. Perhaps this is why they find their short answer—“Afro-Latin@s . . . are people of African descent in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and by extension those of African descent in the United States whose origins are in Latin America and the Caribbean”—so unsatisfying (1). Still, for Laviera, like the forty other poets in this anthology from diverse backgrounds, an Afro-Latin@ background and identification that complicates an already complicated Latin@ identity in the United States, is also an indisputable part of their poetic expression. Because, as Jane Alberdeston Coralin puts it, “we couldn’t shake

our skin” (“Rosa’s Beauty”), Laviera demands a space for a poetic language that is “Afro-Spanish,” much like a life lived through “a blackness in english/ a blackness in spanish.”

Thus, this *¡Manteca!*, like Jiménez Román’s, Flores’ and Laviera’s multifaceted definitions of “Afro-Latin@,” serves a variety of purposes. It includes selected works from an elite group of renowned poets as well as a talented crop of up-and-comers. Despite the dominance of male poets in the earlier years, this anthology demonstrates the increasing importance of women in Latin@ poetry, presenting twenty female writers (half the contributors). In addition, by focusing on Afro-Latin@ poets, *¡Manteca!* strives to highlight an important but often neglected aspect of US poetry: that Afro-Latin@ poets are a key part of poetic expression and innovation that is uniquely (North) American. As such, an important contribution of this anthology is to break the often rigid boundaries between Latin@ and African American poetry, to simultaneously center blackness as an important aspect of Latin@ poetry and Latinidad as crucial to African American poetry. In doing so, I hope to highlight how the work of diverse poets, such as John Murillo, Jane Alberdeston Coralin, Willie Perdomo, Aracelis Grimay, Adrián Castro, Peggy Robles-Alvarado, Natalie Caro, Bonafide Rojas and *otras* crush existing notions of what it means to be an African American, Latin@ or American poet. It is, I hope, a gathering of exciting work that pushes for an inclusive (but not unselective) definition of US poetry that includes Latin@s of all backgrounds who live and breathe varying conceptions of blackness.

Anthologizing Blackness in Latin America

Although an anthology of this sort, that brings together Afro-Latin@ writers, exists neither in poetry nor prose, antecedents in the past century can be found in the work of

anthologizers throughout Latin America who assembled work both by black and white poets and about black life, including writings by African American poets since the 1930s. In “The Emergence of Afro-Hispanic Poetry: Some Notes on Canon Formation,” Edward Mullen surveys the first Latin American anthologies of black poetry to demonstrate how an interest in black poetry influenced canon formation in Latin America, resulting in a consideration of black culture as critical to conceiving of a Latin American literary tradition that was separate from a European one (449-450). Significantly, however, the Latin American understanding of what is meant by black poetry in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly that emerging in the Caribbean, demonstrates a very different conception than that outlined by James Weldon Johnson’s *The Book of American Negro Poetry* in 1922. As Chilean professor and critic Arturo Torres Riosco announced in 1942:

Without assuming the role of an augur, it is permissible to point out a new movement which is encouraging for the future of Spanish American poetry. This is the emergence in the last few years of a highly original genre: Negro verse. That is to say, poetry on Negro themes, using Negro rhythms, and composed by members of both the African and the European races. (127)

Throughout the next three decades, Torres Riosco’s pronouncement was to be repeated in the pages of major anthologies, scholarly journals and textbooks. As the Spanish American literary canon underwent a gradual reevaluation, Torres Riosco’s terminology was to be modified; “negro” was replaced by a series of overlapping labels—negroid, negrista, Afro-Cuban, mulato—culminating in the late seventies with the choice of the term “Afro-Hispanic” to refer broadly to that literature “by, about and

written to but not just for people of African descent in the Spanish speaking world" (Lewis 3).

Nevertheless, at its inception, "Afro-Hispanic poetry"³ or *poesía negra*, was a genre written by blacks, whites and those in between.⁴ In fact, the movement to anthologize Afro-Latin American poetry was marked by the participation of white intellectuals, such as Luis Palés Matos and José Zacarías Tallet, who produced a highly picturesque but external view of black culture signalled by a predominance of sensuous images and onomatopoeic rhythms. Moreover, in these early anthologies the majority of the writers included were white.⁵ While a study of these early anthologies demonstrates an important development from an Afro-Cuban or Caribbeanist perspective to a more universal (including African American)⁶ perspective, as well as one which included more writers of African descent, the most important contribution was the argument made by the early anthologizers, Ballagas and Guirao that the only valid literary expression in Cuba must be black-based, for it was the only form which could be used as an authentic alternative to American and European cultural imperialism (Guirao xix).

Despite the importance of this development in the Cuban and emerging Latin American canon, the interest in black culture has often masked either a folkloric view or fetishization of blackness alongside a discourse of *mestizaje* in Latin American studies that turns a blind eye to the persistence of rampant racism in the academy, and whose influence can also be seen in Latin@ Studies today. Books such as José Sanz y Díaz's *Lira negra* (1945), Emilio Ballagas' *Mapa de la poesía negra americana* (1946), Juan Felipe Toruño's *Poesía negra: Ensayo y antología* (1953) and Simón Latin@s's *La poesía negra* (1956) all anthologized poets from throughout the Americas, yet tended to view black poetry as a folkloric expression or one of social interest. For

example, in Toruño's introduction, he prepares the reader for a lack of art and modern innovation in black poetry:

En la poesía dominada negra, hay un problema-arte. Esta es la manifestación de vida resquebrajada y estentórea, ahíta de aspiraciones y deseos. . . . En el arte poético negro no están las estructuras que presentan otras tendencias modernas o ultramodernas en las que se nota la preocupación por pulir, depurar, sutilizar, perfeccionar o aglomerar duples, triples o cuádruples figuras en metáforas que fusionan contenido y continente, como en el Ultraísmo; ni por usar términos u otros recursos estructurales. En la poesía negra compruébese lo contrario. Esta presenta ambientes, sentimientos, ideas, acciones, sucesos, problemas y acontecimientos en corrientes directas y sin oscuranas expresivas. Es un arte poético en que se tipifican estruendo, arrebató, turbulencia, padecimiento, fiebre, escándalo, fiereza y el achatamiento psíquico del negro. . . . En lo negro, con las articulaciones estallantes, están las intenciones al mostrar la existencia sometida a la injusticia, enseñando el tenebroso y tajado panorama de vidas a través de las expresiones que en tal poesía se usan: ausencia de todo refinamiento en la poemática leal a una consigna.⁷ (46)

According to Toruño and others, black poetry, especially that actually written by blacks, is a poetry that feels passionately about and expresses the unjust life of blacks in Latin America, but does not do so in thoughtful, complex verses. In spite of this racialized view of black poetry, virtually all the editors dealt with the issue of authenticity—whether whites could write black poetry—concluding that the American experience of cultural *mestizaje* provided the answer: “no se trata aquí de poesía negra en toda su pureza, mitología y originalidad africana, sino de poesía de contraste y asimilación de culturas” (Ballagas, *Mapa de*

la poesía americana 8).⁸ Although the introduction of poets who were black, such as Candelario Obeso and Jorge Artel, as well as the rare publication of Adalberto Ortiz's *Tierra, son y tambor: Cantares negros y mulatos* (1945), an anthology edited by an Ecuadorian black writer, would lead to a somewhat more varied and less folkloric depiction of the black experience (especially with the prominence of writers such as Nicolás Guillén and Reginio Pedroso), the existence of racialized distinctions and hierarchies in the world of Latin American poetry was often glossed over in favor of a celebration of a shared mixed heritage.

This literary standpoint was especially influenced by the Afro-Cubanism movement, which from its inception was conceptualized as a reflection of the fusion or union of black and white Cubans. Nicolás Guillén's introduction to the 1931 edition of his Afro-Cuban poetry, *Sóngoro cosongo*, is one of the clearest examples of this interpretation:

Diré firmamente que éstos son unos versos mulatos. Participan acaso de los mismos elementos que entran en la composición étnica de Cuba . . . Y las dos razas que en la Isla salen a flor de agua, distantes en lo que se ve, se tienden un garfio submarino, como esos puentes hondos que unen en secreto dos continentes. Por lo pronto, el espíritu de Cuba es mestizo. Y del espíritu hacia la piel nos vendrá el color definitivo. Algún día se dirá: "color cubano." Estos poemas quieren adelantar ese día.⁹ (240)

The dominance of this idealized *mestizaje* of races is clear from anthologies published in Latin America more recently. For example, in her 1992 *Poesia Negra Brasileira*, Brazilian Zilá Bernd questions the utility of talking about a "black literature" in "um país multiétnico e pluricultural como o Brasil."¹⁰ According to Bernd:

Que tipo de textos entrariam na classificação de literatura negra? Aqueles que propusessem uma temática negra, não importando a cor da pele do autor, aqueles produzidos por autores negros? Mas como saber, em um país mestiço como o Brasil quem é negro, ou mulato e quem não é? Contudo, reconhecer a mestiçagem étnica e cultural não apenas no Brasil, mas em toda a América Latina, não deve nos impedir de reconhecer igualmente a construção paulatina de uma identidade negra na literatura Latino-americana, onde o Brasil não seria uma exceção, revelando a emergência de um processo de consciência do que significa *ser negro na América*. Torna-se, então imprescindível, ao iniciarmos uma reflexão sobre a literatura negra no Brasil, definir seu conceito. Para nós, o único conceito aceitável de literatura negra é o que se alicerça nas constantes discursivas das obras. Logo, em nossa perspectiva, não sera apenas a utilização de uma temática negra (o negro como objeto), nem a cor de pele do escritor (critério epidérmico) que caracterizariam a existência de uma literatura negra, mas a emergência de um *eu-enunciador que se assume como negro* no discurso literário. Nesta medida, o conceito de literatura negra associa-se à existência, no Brasil, de uma articulação entre textos dados por um modo negro de ver e de sentir o mundo, transmitido por um discurso caracterizado, seja no nível da escolha lexical, seja no nível dos símbolos utilizados, pelo desejo de resgatar uma memória negra esquecida.¹¹ (Bernd 13)

In Bernd's picture then, black literature becomes something based on a black protagonist through which Brazil can celebrate a (now past) history of black struggle in a present-day, happily mixed, racially ambiguous society, where it is impossible to determine racial ancestry anyway. While there is nothing innately wrong with a discourse that celebrates racial and cultural *mesti-*

zaje in Latin America, what is problematic is how these interpretations have made racial discrimination seem like a problem of the past. Moreover, in the case of literature, it has often resulted in the exclusion of Afro-Latin American writers, under the guise of racial ambiguity in a supposedly mixed and thus nondiscriminatory area of the world.

In Latin America, a strong interest in Afro-Hispanic culture seemed to reach a peak in the 1970s and early 1980s, a period which saw the publication of more than a half-dozen anthologies: Rosa E. Valdés-Cruz, *La poesía negroide en América* (1970); Hortensia Ruíz del Vizo, *Poesía negra del Caribe y otras áreas* (1971); Enrique Noble, *Literatura afro-hispanoamericana. Poesía y prosa de ficción* (1973); Jorge Luis Morales, *Poesía afroantillana y negrista* (1976); Mónica Mansour and Jose Luis González, *Poesía negra de América* (1976); and Aurora de Albornoz and Julio Rodríguez Luis, *Sensemayá: La poesía negra en el mundo hispanohablante* (1980). Like their predecessors, however, the majority of these volumes treated the poetic production of black and white Latin American authors as part of the same genre of *poesía negra*, *poesía afroantillana* and *poesía negrista* (Arnedo-Gómez 10).

The emergence of the field of Afro-Latin American studies in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s led to an important critique of these picturesque views of Latin American literature as inclusive of writers from the entire race spectrum. Largely a result of the frequent exchanges between African American and Latin American scholars stemming from political interaction in the Black Power and Civil Rights Movement and the increasing popularity of the Latin American novel, Afro-Latin American or Afro-Hispanic studies was supported by the founding of the Afro-Hispanic Institute at Howard University in 1981 and the establishment of several Afro-Hispanic journals including *Cuadernos Afro-Americanos* (Caracas, 1975), *Negritud* (Bogotá, 1977), *Studies in Afro-Hispanic Literature* (Purchase, New York, 1977) and the

Afro-Hispanic Review (Washington, DC, 1982, now located at Vanderbilt in Nashville, Tennessee) (Kutzinski 122).

Ironically, this academic progress came at a time when many Nuyorican writers now featured in this anthology, such as Miguel Algarín, Louis Reyes Rivera, Miguel Piñero, Sandra María Esteves and Pedro Pietri, along with other poets of Afro-Latin@ descent such as Panamanian Lorenzo Thomas, were commenting on the persistence of racism in US Latin@ communities. While this Latin Americanist attention on writers of African descent, as well as on the different but persistent hierarchal race structures of Latin America, led to important critiques of many of these early anthologies that glossed over racial discrimination while excluding Afro-descended writers (Lewis 2), it did not draw an analogous attention within the emerging field of US Latin@ studies.

Nevertheless, while US studies of Latin American anthologies worked to reveal the problematic praise for Palés Matos,¹² anthologizing choices¹³ and essentializing characteristics of much of literary criticism done on Afro-Latin American poetry¹⁴, Latin@ poets in the United States were struggling to make sense of racial attitudes often based in Latin America but persistent (though transformed) in the United States. Nuyorican Poets Café owner Miguel Algarín describes his circumstances this way:

My grandmother was black, but my mother is light-skinned. My grandmother worked all her life and wanted her children to have a better life than hers. She insisted that her daughters not greet her or speak directly to her when they were in public because she did not want them to be associated with her. It might limit their possibilities, she thought. That hurt my mother. She had to cross the street or go on the other side of the plaza if she saw Julia coming around the corner. Puerto Rican racism is something terrible. My grandmother was afraid that if people associated her daugh-

ters with her, they would not be able to get married to acceptable men . . . When I think about that now, I find it is extremely painful. (Hernández, C 37)

This lack of attention from the academy, in addition to the clear connection and implications of Latin American treatment of Afro-descendants continues to be an issue, as Tanya K. Hernández and Anani Dzidzienyo point out in their respective articles, “‘Too black to be Latina/o’: Blackness and Blacks as foreigners in Latin@ studies” (2003) and “With the African connection in Latin@ Studies” (2003).

Afro-Latinidad in a US Context

While Jiménez Román and Flores’ seminal volume explores what it means to be an Afro-Latin@, *¡Manteca!* presents Afro-Latin@ poets, another context where Afro-Latinidad is often not part of a Latin@ conversation. This collection of poets—all active within the last fifty years or so—also draws attention to the difficulty of working with a relatively “new” category. As Jiménez Román and Flores state, “As straightforward as this definition would seem, the reality is that the term is not universally accepted and there is no consensus about what it means. The difficulties surrounding what we call ourselves reflects the complex histories of Africans and their descendants in the Americas” (1). Although some variant of Afro-Latin@ has been used for over a century to describe people of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole, the term has only really been incorporated in a US context since the 1990s (Jiménez Román and Flores 2) and even later in (US) Latin@ Studies (Torres-Sailant 435, Hernandez T. 152, Mills “Chitlins” 1, Dzidzienyo 160).

Nevertheless, the history of Afro-Latin@s in the United States predates not just the nation’s founding, but the first English settlements (Jiménez Román and Flores 17). The first

Africans who came to the Americas as slave labor in 1502 were brought to Hispaniola (now the island that is composed of Haiti and the Dominican Republic) by the Spaniards (Laó Montes 2). Africans were present in the sixteenth-century Spanish forays into what would later become the United States (Wood 19), and these early Spanish-speaking peoples of African descent (both free and enslaved), were some of the main settlers of the Southwest (Forbes 27), as well as New Orleans and Florida (Gould 28). The Afro-Latin@ Pico Family governed Mexican California in the nineteenth century (Forbes 35). Likewise, while there has been significant recent attention by scholars on Afro-Latinidad, scholars such as Antonio López, Frank Guirdy and Adrián Burgos have continued to push scholarship on Afro-Latin@s back in to the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during the past ten years.

Afro-Latin@s, not unlike Latin@s in general, are often seen as newcomers and foreigners, which makes it difficult to study what can be described as “a diaspora within a diaspora” (Laó-Montes 1). But this long history is not lost in the work of such poets as Adrián Castro, an Afro-Latin@ from Miami, who regularly incorporates African languages, “the ancestor’s mother tongue,” into his work. In “Pulling the Muse from the Drum,” for example, he traces the history of the Spanish slave trade to “Caribbean jungles . . . through stained walls in Little Havana/ graffiti parks Lower East Side/ frozen lake Wicker Park Chaaitown.” It is a history that, much like Laviera’s universalizing gaze of African roots, is simultaneously Castro’s inspiration and what unites Latin@s, what he calls “the muse that is we.”

According to the 2010 Census, 2.5 percent of the US Latin@ population identified their race as black or African American; however, 6 percent identified themselves as of two or more races, and 36.7 percent selected “some other race.” Not only did a majority of the Latin@ population choose not to identify as

white (53.0 percent), but also, a comparison to the general population demonstrates a clear difference in the way Latin@s perceive race in the United States. Only 2.3 percent and 0.2 percent of the US population selected “two or more races” or “some other race,” respectively (Humes et al 6), indicating that Latin@s make up a large segment of the US population that does not fit into what David Hollinger has called “the ethnoracial pentagon” made up of whites, blacks, Indians, Asian Americans and Hispanics (Hollinger 8). Numerous scholars have commented on the variations in the way Latin@s of different national, class, ethnic and racial backgrounds view race in the United States and the barriers this presents for Latin@ unity.¹⁵ At the same time, Dzidzienyo comments, this recognition of *mestizaje* does little to disrupt hegemonic racialized models:

The conventional “model” of race mixture, *mestizaje* as a quasi-panacea for race relations elsewhere in the Americas, that is, minus the United States, did not imply combatting either racial hierarchy or privilege. Thus, *mestizaje* on its own is not a sufficient proof of any recognition of the equality of all the component races. At the end of the mixing process, white hegemony remained unchallenged throughout Latin America. In the absence of any unambiguous challenge to white supremacist models, there does not appear to have emerged any alternate models that are free of rank orders, with whiteness at the apex and blackness and/or indigenouness at the base. Neither has the (rhetorical) honoring of specific cultural expressions of African provenance, such as musical expressions, which have been shifted from the margins to the center of national cultural life in specific Latin American societies, resulted in the transformation of the overall negativity assigned to African origins, in looks, speech patterns, and ontologies. (161)

Racialized thinking follows immigrants to the United States and affects darker-skinned Latin@s.¹⁶ However, what is important in the context of this anthology is how it also affects the study of Latin@ literature. Thus while Dzidzienyo unpacks the “conceptual panacea of *mestizaje*” to reveal the extent to which the pride Latin@s take in being enlightened about race relations as a mixed people is accompanied by the resilience of White supremacist ideals, he also persuasively argues that many Latin@ Studies scholars have been content to focus on *mestizaje* without thoroughly interrogating the subtext of White supremacy. Indeed, one area that is often overlooked in Latin@ Studies is the treatment of Afro-Latin@s within the Latin@ community. As Tanya Hernández points out in “Too Black to be Latina/o,” “if the *mestizaje* race relations mindset were indeed such an enlightened space, one would expect relations with Afro-Latin@/as and Anglo-Blacks in the United States to embody the fantasy of racial democracy so often touted in Latin American countries. . . . Instead, an examination of the Afro-Latin@ context reveals a racialized treatment of Afro-Latin@ identity as foreign” (152). What is most disturbing about this multi-layered dynamic of Latin@s putting forth as an image of enlightened racial thinking by virtue of their racially mixed heritage while simultaneously negating the existence of Afro-Latin@s, is the way in which the mindset obstructs any ability to effectively work through the complexity of the socioeconomic racial hierarchy that purposely discourages racialized groups from attacking White supremacy as a unified force.

In some small part, then, creating an Afro-Latin@ anthology of poets diminishes a reverence for white or European heritage within the Latin@ arts, encouraging a reevaluation of Latin@ literary and American literary canon formation. As African American anthologizers from James Weldon Johnson to Henry Louis Gates Jr. have pointed out, canon formation has everything to do with politics whereby a “broader access” functions as a sign

that—in this case—Afro-Latin@s are full and equal members of American democratic institutions (Gates xxix), and are afforded all the rights and privileges that go along with such membership. Whereas James Weldon Johnson believed that the recognition of an African American literary tradition would end racism in the United States, I believe that the recognition of Afro-Latin@ poetry will bring to light new structures of racism that have emerged and entrenched themselves as this country has become increasingly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic.

In Search of an Afro-Latin@ Literature

¡Manteca!: An Anthology of Afro-Latin@ Poets, presents the work of twenty men and twenty women who self-identify as Afro-Latin@s. As editor, I gave no guidelines or definitions to what I thought Afro-Latin@ “poetry” was. When asked for instruction—I purposefully gave none, as this response to one query demonstrates: “The anthology is an anthology of Afro-Latin@ poetry, but I would never try to categorize that in any particular or limiting way. Just send me your best work, the work that you feel represents you best as a poet, present and/or past, if you’re so inclined.” As I began to receive work, I realized that the experiences and poetic expression of Afro-Latinidad were so diverse that I wouldn’t and couldn’t begin to categorize an “Afro-Latin@ Poetry.” Not only were these poets diverse in their heritage, location and poetic thematic, choices and influences, some came to Afro-Latinidad via middle passage and/or migration and others through the more recent marriages of their family. In many ways, Bonafide Rojas’ “Thirty Ways to Look at a Nuyorican” demonstrates a microcosm of what this anthology represents as he pushes readers beyond common definitions of puertorriqueñidad.

Examining the treatment of Afro-Latin@s is work that begins with us Latin@s and especially those of us in Latin@ lit-