One afternoon late in 1929, two Afro-Cuban men visited the Havana home of an Afro-Cuban woman to conduct an interview for a newspaper article. Nicolás Guillén was already known for his journalism and was on the way to becoming a renowned poet. His companion, Gustavo Urrutia, was a prominent figure in Afro-Cuban social and intellectual life as the editor of “Ideales de una Raza” (Ideals of a Race), a Sunday page on Afro-Cuban topics in El Diario de la Marina. Guillén published the interview in “Ideales” as “Señorita Consuelo Serra,” a title that revealed to readers his interviewee’s connection to Cuban history: Consuelo Serra was the daughter of Rafael Serra, the famous journalist and Cuban independence leader in the United States during the late nineteenth century.¹

Serra proved a provocative interview, beyond the association with her father. She had migrated from Cuba to New York City when she was seven years old and lived there for fourteen years. She went to public school and graduated with degrees in English from Hunter College and education from the city’s Normal School before returning to the island in 1906.² This was not lost on Guillén and Urrutia. In the article, Guillén describes how, on the afternoon in question, they come to Serra’s apartment, where a “girl, black and smiling” (niña negra y sonriente), opens the door. As they wait for their host, they note the very few paintings on the walls, a sign, Guillén says, of good taste. And then Serra arrives, also “smiling.” Her speech leaves an impression on Guillén: “despite having lived in the North for fourteen years, her Spanish is pure [conserva limpio su castellano], without any of those incriminating Rs [erres
delatoras], pronounced with a grinding sound [como si se las triturara], that so clearly registers the influence of English.” Serra begins to comment on her college career, but Urrutia “interrupts her”: “Of course, a college exclusively for people of color [gente de color] . . .” “Nothing of the kind,” she replies. “For blacks and whites [Para negros y para blancos].” Serra explains that, in her graduating class, six students were “of color” and that she was “the only Cuban,” yet she “never felt uneasy [molesta] or passed over [preterida].” This prompts a reply from Urrutia: “So in New York there are no problems,” he begins, only before he can specify the kind of problems he has in mind, it is Serra who cuts in: “Oh, I didn’t mean to suggest as much! Yes, there are, as is the case everywhere in the Union. Slightly less than in the South, but it exists. What I have tried to point out is the fact that I never had an occasion to get upset [disgustarme] at the college. And on the street . . . Well, on the street, whenever I ran into some difficulty, I always had the authorities on my side. But that only happened a few times. I really have no complaints [quejas] about New York.”

Consuelo Serra established schools, taught English, and wrote journalism in Cuba during the first decades of the twentieth century, the early years of the republic. In Guillén’s narrative, she prompts among “middle-class” Afro-Cubans a tense encounter, a primary reason for which is her seemingly erstwhile Afro-Cuban Americanness: her identity and history as a Cuban woman de color, a negra, living in the United States. For Guillén, this implies a possible impurity, one whose signs he seeks, not surprisingly, in language. Guillén puts the sounds of Serra’s speech under surveillance. For Urrutia, it leads to pointed questions regarding her exposure to racial injustice in the United States, the significance of which is fraught, as evidenced by the tacit conversation: nowhere does Guillén show Urrutia or Serra calling these “problems” by name, even as Serra offers examples that leave little doubt in the reader’s mind. She notes U.S. racism’s geographies and uses her personal experience to place it in institutions such as the unsegregated school, where it may produce bad feelings and jeopardize opportunity, and unsegregated public space, where its effects, now implying a physical menace, call for an intervention by the state. Serra’s spoken Spanish was a signifier for her Afro-Cuban American history even earlier still. In 1905, the Afro-Cuban intellectual Miguel Gualba wrote in Havana’s El Nuevo Criollo that “Consuelo, despite having taken courses for thirteen years exclusively in the English language [en puro idioma inglés], speaks our language, hers [habla nuestro idoma, el suyo]—the one of the home in which her
conscience was formed—correctly and with such naturalness as if she had been studying it in Cuba the whole time.” There is in these anxious expressions of an English-free, Spanish-speaking ability (Gualba goes so far as to imagine its power to undo Serra’s U.S. migration altogether, transporting her back to the island) a link between femininity and Afro-Cuban Americanness: a Spanish-language “home” in the United States cultivates the class-identified propriety of the Afro-Cuban American woman. Indeed, the final questions Guillén poses Serra in the article are “Are you a feminist [feminista], Miss Serra? Are you in favor of the vote?” She says, “Yes, I am a feminist,” and begins to recall a lecture she gave as a student in New York on “equal rights for women.” But just then the telephone rings, cutting off the conversation. As Guillén leaves the apartment with Urrutia, he again draws attention to that sonic sign for how an Afro-Cuban woman in Havana may, in the end, “really have no complaints about New York”: as he walks down the stairs, Guillén hears Serra’s voice, now on the telephone, “slowly fading away.”

Unbecoming Blackness inquires into expressions across literature and performance of an Afro-Cuban experience in the United States that the apprehensive imagining of an English-sounding Consuelo Serra would invoke. It begins during the period of the Marina article, with Afro-Cuban American writers and performers of the first republican generation who migrated to the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, especially to New York City, and continues into the late twentieth century, with those who arrived or were born into a majority white-Cuban exile that, in the aftermath of the 1980 Mariel boatlift, witnessed an increase in the Afro-Cuban population of the United States. The book examines the idea of an Afro-Cuban American voice tainted by the English language in the United States as an indication of broader concerns over the kinds of relations and relationships that Afro-Cuban Americans, as writers and performers, may cultivate beyond the island: relations in trans/national cultures and politics, relationships with fellow Cuban Americans, with other Latinas/os—white, indigenous, and of African descent—and with African Americans. It also sees in the clipped, tacit conversation on racial injustice in the United States and Serra’s accompanying admission to having “no complaints about New York” a hint regarding how Afro-Cuban Americans may reside on U.S. soil despite the fact of Anglo and Latino racisms, a choice the book explores as an example of an Afro-Cuban American redefinition of the United States as a space propitious for the pursuit of careers in literature and performance, not to mention the possible achievement of citizenship rights. In poetry, fiction, and the
essay, in blackface theater, poetry recital, and film—indeed, in artistic careers often unavailable to them in Cuba—Afro-Cuban Americans transform the shapes, themes, and concepts of their work in and beyond racial identity in a body of critically underexamined texts that surface the importance of aesthetic re-creation in the constitution of Cuban and African diasporas in the United States.

This book discusses Afro-Cuban American literature and performance as an example of afrolatinidad: the Afro-Latino condition in the United States, which Afro-Cuban Americans share with other Latinas/os of African descent, including, but not limited to, those with origins in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela. Central to afrolatinidad is the social difference that blackness makes in the United States: how an Anglo white supremacy determines the life
chances of Afro-Latinas/os hailed as black and how a Latino white supremacy reproduces the colonial and postcolonial Latin American privileging of blanco over negro and mulato (mixed-race) identities, now on behalf of white Latinas/os who may themselves face Anglo forms of racializing discrimination. Yet, if an Afro-Latino difference reveals how, for Afro-Cuban Americans, encounters with white Cuban Americans may lead to exclusion—to the experience of an older Cuban racism, now become a newer Cuban American phenomenon, heightened by an Anglo-racist United States—it is true that Afro-Cuban Americans may occupy with white Cuban Americans the space of an apparent multiracial inclusion through a shared cubanoamericanidad, a Cuban Americanness that, as an ideal of a transnational Cuban belonging, purports an understanding beyond race among Cubans in the United States. Such a shared Cuban Americanness, in particular as cultural and linguistic affinities that bear upon social mobility in the Cuban centers of the country, influences how Afro-Cuban Americans negotiate (if not limit or reject) relationships with other Afro-Latinas/os, not to mention African Americans. And yet, indeed, there are moments in which Afro-Cuban Americans collaborate in solidarity with African Americans and other non-Latinas/os of African descent (those from the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean, for example) despite the social marginalization such collaboration may entail in Anglo and Latino communities—a risk often deemed worth it, given the opportunity Afro-Cuban Americans may gain from an association with African Americans, measured even against the benefits that Anglo-white and Latino-white hegemonies promise them as foreign blacks and fellow trans/nationals, respectively. To attune a discussion of Afro-Cuban Americans to afrolatinidad in literature and performance is to challenge Cuban America’s normate whiteness—to posit, in fact, an Afro-Cuban America, one made visible in texts ranging from the Caribbean Latino modernist period, with its turn toward minority rights and anti-imperialism after the exile-directed projects of Antillean liberation at the turn of the century, to the postrevolutionary exodus and founding of a Cuban Miami in the last half of the twentieth century, a span whose latter period is familiar to Latino literary and cultural studies, though less so in terms of the Afro-Cuban American countertradition I offer here.

The Afro-Cuban American writers and performers I discuss represent overlapping Cuban and African diasporas, which is to say that histories of displacement from Cuba and Africa bear upon them simultaneously, with changing, uneven effects on their relations, both material and symbolic,
to race and nation, host- and homelands. It is a matter that brings together conversations on the discourse of diaspora in African American and Latino Studies, which I do through the work of Brent Edwards and Ricardo Ortiz. For Edwards, who has historicized the concept among black intellectuals and activists in the twentieth century, diaspora is most useful when it guides us to consider specific contacts between people of African descent across the Americas, Europe, and Africa in a way that attends to difference—“difference not only internally (the ways transnational black groupings are fractured by nation, class, gender, sexuality, and language) but also externally: in appropriating a term so closely associated with Jewish thought, we are forced to think not in terms of some closed or autonomous system of African dispersal but explicitly in terms of a complex past of forced migrations and racializations.” Edwards continues that the “use of the term diaspora . . . implies neither that it offers the comfort of abstraction, an easy recourse to origins, nor that it provides a foolproof anti-essentialism: instead, it forces us to articulate discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference in full view of the risks of that endeavor.” This invitation for criticism and theory to turn toward diasporic praxes in their particulars and, especially, to their “constitutive tension” in nationalism and internationalism resonates with Ortiz’s thought in *Cultural Erotics in Cuban America* regarding a possible Cuban diaspora. Working off James Clifford’s treatment of the concept, Ortiz shows that any thinking on a post-1959 Cuban diaspora must attend to the ways in which nationalist inclinations urge Cuban Americans to bring to an end their U.S. displacement through a redemptive return to Cuba (however deferred it may be in practice): diaspora as a desire to recover an island-situated national identity against a Cuban American transnational belonging. With the lure of a territorial homeland, one located “nearby” in the hemisphere, Ortiz underscores the importance of recognizing the variety of Cuban departures to the United States—the moment of a post-1959 diaspora’s initiation. “Exile” is crucial in this regard for its meaning as an unwilling political (or, against U.S. imperial geopolitics, a willing economic) displacement, although by now there is a history of post–Cold War Cuban departures that, in their most recent form, are very well indicative of a postexile: the back-and-forth movements between the United States and Cuba among recent migrants that trouble the earlier exile’s implication of a one-way flow (until such time as a redemptive return). For Ortiz, thinking Cuban diaspora is possible, so long as we account for these limits—limits that touch on sexual-
ity, where the governing of Cuban bodies, on and off the island, impacts who can (or must) leave the country, who can (or cannot) return.10

The diasporas of Afro-Cuban America—the African and Cuban—unfold in relation to afrolatinidad. A sign of African diaspora appears in the way Afro-Cuban Americans articulate blackness in the black-white spaces of the Anglo United States through (a memory of) Cuban nationalism’s postracial and mestizaje ideologies: the former emerging during Cuba’s nineteenth-century wars of liberation as the privileging of a national, over a racial, form of identification, the latter in the early twentieth century as an ideal of a “mixed-race” nationalism, invoked often as culture, where neither black nor white would predominate. Over the twentieth century, Cuban racial injustice continued despite (indeed, because of) postracial and mestizaje nationalisms, which, while providing room for Afro-Cuban mobility, often failed to alter the nation’s de facto white privilege, a social legacy the 1959 revolution inherited and revised as a “raceless” revolutionary nationalism—even as its class-based policies helped disproportionately poor Afro-Cubans.11 A sign of African diaspora appears also in the way Afro-Cuban Americans, in particular those migrating before the revolution, link blackness in the United States with (a memory of) the long-established forms of island-based Afro-Cuban community, which have included mutual-aid societies, religious groupings, and social clubs.12 Such an African diaspora among Afro-Cuban American writers and performers determines the cultural (and, less often in the texts I discuss, political) “linkages” they establish with African Americans in the un/segregated United States, linkages at times firm and enduring, at times uncertain and fleeting. In the Latino United States, Afro-Cuban Americans twist the meaning of a Cuban diaspora by bringing their afrolatinidad to bear on encounters with other Afro-Cuban Americans and white Cuban Americans across the pre- and post-1959 spaces of an unacknowledged white cubanoamericanidad—a Latino whiteness that, in fact, may not welcome a possibly “blackening” association with Afro-Cuban Americans under the Anglo-U.S. gaze. Afro-Cuban Americans mark a (white) Cuban diaspora as black, unsettling its memory, if not practice, of ideological postracial, mestizaje, and “raceless” antirevolutionary nationalisms, now transnationalisms—a disruption that, given my period reach back into the early twentieth century, involves the movements of an Afro-Cuban American diaspora well before, yet carrying through and beyond, the midcentury breaks and migrations associated with the revolution.
A text from this earlier period is the Afro-Cuban American Bernardo Ruiz Suárez’s *The Color Question in the Two Americas*, a historicopolitical essay published in the United States in an English translation in 1922, the tenth anniversary of the killing of thousands of Afro-Cubans on the island by the Cuban government and white militias in the “race war” of 1912, a major event of Cuban racial terror begun after members of the Independent Party of Color, an Afro-Cuban political organization founded to redress racial injustice, had begun to protest and resist the party’s banning by the state. Well within memory of 1912—perhaps even commemorating it with the book’s publication date—Ruiz Suárez offers another approach to the idea that Afro-Cuban Americans have “no complaints about New York,” that, indeed, they may choose to lead a life in the United States, however much such a decision may signify to other Cubans, on and off the island, as unbecoming: as an “unseemly” association with black subalterns (African Americans, fellow Afro-Cuban Americans) in the Anglo-racist United States, and as an *un*becoming of one’s island-Cuban black identity, its “becoming,” as a revision or even an undoing, Afro-Latino.

In a passage on comparative experiences of racism in the United States and Latin America, Ruiz Suárez writes that the “rough and brutal and contemptuous . . . methods of the Anglo-Saxon” in the United States nevertheless “goad the black [that is, African American] man into a life of activity and, consequently, a life creative of ideals which may in time be realized.” He goes on to say that, for an Afro-Cuban American, “it is most gratifying to observe the accomplishments of his congeners in the United States in the development of their own instruments of civilization.” For Ruiz Suárez, such a state of affairs contrasts with the conditions in a place like Cuba. In such “Spanish-American countries,” the “apparent cordiality” of members of the “white race” works to “conceal their sentiment” of racism, which leads to a “specious national unity” that, for an Afro-Cuban, thwarts the “self-dependence of his race.” In the “gratifying” experience of beholding “the accomplishments of his congeners,” Ruiz Suárez’s narrative exemplifies the diaspora cultures of Afro-Cuban America: in particular, it expresses an unbecoming desire for the way in which African Americans belong in the “rough and brutal and contemptuous” Anglo United States—a description here characteristic of the discourse of a violent U.S. inhospitableness that, on the island, often becomes a message delivered to Afro-Cubans (and, in a sign of the Afro-Latino difference, less so, if ever, to white Cubans) to discourage their migration north, a discourse observed across the twentieth century,
as an Afro-Cuban Mariel migrant in 1980 Miami demonstrates, recollecting how, “in Cuba, they said dogs were set upon black people here [que aquí a los negros les echaban los perros].” In the aftermath of 1912, with its catastrophic failure of an island Afro-Cuban project for “self-dependence,” such an Afro-Cuban American desire for African American institutions in the United States makes sense in terms of desire as a complex of always wanting after, if never quite achieving, its object, an idea apparent in the translated condition of Color Question itself, which comes to us not in the English-language voice of Ruiz Suárez himself—in his achievement of Anglophony—but in the translated echo of his Spanish, the Afro-Latino threat of which, as a possible Anglophone-influenced impurity, we have seen in Serra. There is an implication in all this, finally, that Afro-Cubans are somehow “better off” being in and belonging to an explicitly racist U.S. nation rather than, it turns out, Cuba. This being and belonging is asserted against the “best interests” of a postracial, mestizo, even negro island-Cuban nation—indeed, against the “best interests” of Afro-Cubans themselves. It is a desire signaling Cuban nationalism as a struggle over the “enjoyment” of a Cuban “way of life” from which Afro-Cubans, often assigned a menacing, excessive enjoyment of the nation, such as in 1912, are now “stealing” themselves (and something of the Cuban nation-myth) away to the Afro-Cuban American United States.

An Afro-Cuban American voice tainted by English in the United States is important for understanding the writers and performers in my study, since such a voice, as a figure for the literary and performance languages in a twentieth-century Afro-Cuban America, emerges as a primary site of racialization: the way in which an Afro-Latino racial identity is “made” in the United States, depending on how one sounds (in writing, in performance) in English, Spanish, or both at the same time. The contemporary Afro-Cuban American novelist H. G. Carrillo makes this point, that the English/Spanish speech, writing, and performance of Afro-Latinas/os, far from being neutral, have a “color,” one that bespeaks Afro-Cuban experiences in coloniality. In the novel Loosing My Espanish, Carrillo’s narrator is a teacher who delivers a long lecture on Cuban history (and thus stands as a performer) before his students: “Miren my hands,” he says. “This color on the map, this bit of orange here, Illinois. Chicago stares me in the face every morning when I shave, señores. My face, this color, a subtle legacy of the British Royal African Company, is, as they say in the vernacular, el color of my Espanish.” Carrillo’s narrator meditates on geography, the body, and language—on the circumstances
that have led an Afro-Cuban American’s mouth to speak the English-language word “Spanish” in a Cuban-Spanish-accented English, as “Espanish.” His narrator is not only resident in the United States—in Chicago: a midwestern Afro-Cuban American—but, in fact, sees himself as the “color” of Chicago. Here we have what Guillén was worried about with Serra, rendered into fictional narrative. The Afro-Cuban American speaks, writes, and performs with an English/Spanish multilingualistic impurity that signifies his blackness not just in (and according to) the Anglo United States but in relation to the other “coloreds” of Illinois, the state’s many Latinas/os and African Americans.¹⁹

To underscore the transhistorical significance of such modalities of race and the multilingualistic, I return to Gustavo Urrutia—now not just a character in Guillén’s writing but a writer himself—and another representation of an early twentieth-century afrolatinidad in Afro-Cuban print culture. In a March 1, 1936, “Armonías” column entitled “Imperialismo afrocubano” (Afro-Cuban Imperialism), Urrutia satirizes imperialism, which in the column stands for U.S. designs on global domination (“imperialismo yanqui”) but also, more implicitly, “black empire,” a very different project of black solidarity involving a “global vision of the race” that “shadows histories of empire and colonization in the Americas.”²⁰ Urrutia’s satirical starting point is the influence that “Armonías” appears to have on the “North American conscience,” for the column, it seems, was circulating, in transamerican fashion, among readers in “the Hispanic-American colony of New York” (la colonia hispanoamericana de New York). Indeed, because of the column’s presence “on the avenues of Harlem” (por las avenidas de Harlem), Urrutia can claim that “our ideals and literature” are being “planted” in the United States and that soon “our vigorous money” will take over “their lands, industries, banks, and press,” to be followed by “our warships and marines,” all to ensure “our conquests.”²¹ But what occasions the column and Urrutia’s sense of its circulation in the United States—what, in fact, occupies half the column’s space in the newspaper—is a brief English-language letter dated February 6, 1936, from the activist, historian, and African-diaspora archive builder Arturo Schomburg in New York City to Urrutia in Havana, a letter reprinted in the column in a Spanish translation. In the English-language original, Schomburg, called by Urrutia in the column an “Afro-boricua” (afroborinqueño), mentions possessing “pages from the Diario de la Marina” with Urrutia’s “articles on ‘Ideals of a Race.’” Schomburg states that these pages have now been “mounted on Japanese transparent silk paper and bound with buckram,” and he calls the
resulting “volume,” the description of which has allowed him to revel in the sensuality of the book-making process, “a most remarkable contribution to the Negro race from the Spanish-American angle.” Schomburg, in fact, feels “certain that there is no other copy like it any part of the world.” What I want to underscore in this text of a (Spanish-translated) Afro-Latino letter within an Afro-Cuban column is Urrutia’s attitude toward Schomburg’s writing—that is, to his letter-writing in English, an Afro-Latino textual condition that, like Carrillo’s novel, confirms the fear of an English-language taint. Urrutia tells readers that “Mr. Arthur Schomburg . . . hardly remembered Spanish” (apenas recordaba el castellano), and he emphasizes the point by remarking, just before quoting “the translation of this letter,” that it has arrived “written in English,” a “detail that urges us to push forward with the reconquest.” Here, Urrutia’s satire slips from an Afro-Cuban “conquest” of the United States to a “reconquest” of Afro-Latinas/os that, recalling the interview with Serra seven years earlier, would discipline an English-writing/speaking Afro-Latina/o by exposing his or her private writing/speech to the public, “on the avenues of Havana,” translated back into its “rightful” language, Spanish. However tongue-in-cheek, in other words, the column would bring under control the linguistic promiscuity of the Afro-Latino United States, which implies not only a “loss” of Spanish among Afro-Latinas/os subject to English-language influences in the United States but the emergence of multilingual Afro-Latino identities, cultures, and politics shaped by contacts with Anglophone, African American history and experience—as was the case, of course, with Schomburg.

The Urrutia-Schomburg text revises the commonplace heard during the early twentieth century that “Spanish-speaking Negroes from Latin America” in Harlem are “distinct because of their language” and have “but little contact with the English-speaking [black] majority.” It invites us, in fact, to reflect on how the subjects of such Spanish-speaking “distinctions” are themselves racialized in relation to their “contact,” however little or great, with the “English-speaking [black] majorities” in the United States—how, in other words, Afro-Latinas/os manage their racialization by vocalizing themselves in certain ways across the multilingual spaces of the United States. “From time to time,” for example, “one may see a very dark Negro who will be speaking Spanish more loudly than the rest” because “he does not wish to be mistaken for an American Negro.” It is a matter of racialization that involves white latinidad as well—the “rest” implied in the passage. For instance, such an Afro-Latino practice of speaking (and, by extension, writing) aloud
one's racial identity, only now in an opposite way, is familiar among white Latinas/os: These “light-skinned” Latinas/os “would avoid speaking Spanish for fear of beingouted” as Cuban American or mainland Puerto Rican, which would carry with it, as I have stated, the menacing possibility of a “blackening” in the Anglo-U.S. gaze. Indeed, in a different way, there were those occasions when silence itself, the absence of spoken language in a social field so plotted by its racial effects, would signify in ways comparable to the Hispanophone loudness of “a very dark Negro,” in particular among African Americans manipulating the contradictions of race in the Americas to invest themselves with the privileges accorded by a divide-and-conquer Anglo-U.S. racism to the more “acceptable” blackness of Afro-Latinas/os. Graciela Pérez, the great Afro-Cuban American singer of La Anacaona and Machito and His Afro-Cubans, better known simply as Graciela, tells how, during gigs of the Afro-Cubans in the mid-1940s in Miami and Miami Beach, the baritone saxophonist Leslie Johnakins, an African American member of the band, would respond in silence—“no contestaba” (he didn’t respond)—when spoken to by Anglo whites, lest he compromise his position as a presumed Afro-Cuban American crossing spaces of U.S. white supremacy otherwise off limits to African Americans. The reason, according to Graciela, was simple: “Tu sabes que ellos no creían que los hispanos son negros, sino que nada más los negros americanos. ¡Mira si eran brutos!” (You know they didn’t think Hispanics were black, only black Americans. How stupid they were!).

These embodied expressions of race and the multilingual, in and of themselves and as figures for the literary and performance voices of Afro-Cuban Americans, frame my work in the following pages. They demonstrate the mutual instantiation of Afro-Latino, African American, and white-Latino identities in the context of hemispheric logics of white-supremacist, colonial domination: whether one is white enough or the right kind of white, or less black or the right kind of black, to receive or be denied rights and advantages, based on how one speaks (or does not) in English, Spanish, or both. When Guillén frets over Consuelo Serra’s possible English-influenced vocality deriving from her time in the United States, when the Afro-boricua Schomburg writes a letter in English from Harlem to the Afro-Cuban Urrutia in Havana, who then translates it into Spanish—when these things happen, something of the racializing logic of the multilingual, scriptive now and sonic, underlies the exchanges. Indeed, a text such as “Imperialismo afrocubano” suggests the possibility that an Afro-Latino in the United States,
writing in English, will be “mistaken for an American Negro,” while an Afro-Cuban in Cuba, writing in “Spanish more loudly than the rest,” will not. The great Afro-Cuban musician and brother-in-law to Graciela, Mario Bauzá, crystallizes the experience of Afro-Cuban Americans in such modalities of the multilingual. Like Graciela, he arrives on the page through the genre of the tape-recorded interview. Speaking in English, Bauzá recalls a return to Cuba from New York City during the early twentieth century. He had gone to the U.S. consulate in Havana to obtain a visa for his wife. Upon hearing him speak, the (presumably Anglo-white) consular representative remarked, “You don’t sound like a Cuban. You sound like a Cuban from Harlem.” Bauzá’s response: “That’s exactly where I learned my English. On the streets of Harlem.”

Unbecoming Blackness contributes through Latino and African-diaspora literary and cultural studies to the critical conversation on Cuban racial identity on the island and in the United States across a variety of disciplines. It pushes this conversation further with its attention to the importance of afrolatinidad; its recovery, through performance texts, of an Afro-Cuban American modernism; and its highlighting the techniques of a post-1959 Cuban American literature in the representation of race as both Afro-Cuban American and white Cuban American. In history and social science, there is a longstanding commitment to the analysis of Afro-Cuban conditions on the island that I hope this book will complement. Another area of dialogue is the tradition of Afro-Hispanist literary criticism, which emerged in the United States during the civil-rights and black cultural-nationalism eras among African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latino critics who sought an idiom to discern the aesthetic and political differences between the works of Afro–Latin American and white Latin American writers on racial “themes,” a project that, informed as well by an earlier Négritude, often asserted a “black” Latin American literary culture over the claims of mestizaje and “negrismo,” the tradition of white writers representing black subjects. In many ways, a discussion of afrolatinidad remembers the high era of Afro-Hispanism in the 1970s, even as the U.S. location of our Afro-Latino texts shifts our conversation beyond black/mestizaje cultural oppositions in Latin American nationalism toward a recognition of how Afro-Latinas/os, as writers and performers in English, Spanish, or both represent the simultaneity of their racialization in the Anglo and Latino United States: in the case of Cubans of African descent, their (un)becoming Afro-Cuban American(ness) in relation to African Americans, other Afro-Latinas/os, and white Latinas/os, a condition
of U.S. racial, “ethnic,” and “minority” experience that may yet engage island-based *mestizaje/postracial* nationalisms, now as a memory (if not a revision) proper to a transnational Afro-Latino culture. To be sure, Afro-Hispanism engages a tradition of literary criticism on island Afro-Cuban writers by island Afro-Cuban intellectuals after the revolution whose arguments, while committed to the nation-state, are hardly reducible to postracial, *mestizaje*, or “raceless”-revolutionary apology. Meanwhile, a growing area of study, one in which this book situates itself directly, concerns the place of Afro-Cubans in the United States. Leading the way have been scholars in history and social science, with the early 1970s essays of Lourdes Casal serving not just as a backdrop here but as a stimulating point of reference for recent work by Nancy Mirabal, Susan Greenbaum, and Frank Guridy. Related to this is the research on Afro-Latinas/os in U.S. music and sports cultures from the early twentieth century to the present. These inquiries into Afro-Cuban American-ness all relate to recent announcements of an overt Afro-Latino commitment in an array of multidisciplinary scholarship, none more so than in Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores’s *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*, a volume that extends Flores’s longstanding effort in the area, characterized well, for the purposes of this introduction, in his recognition that the “Cuban–Puerto Rican continuum . . . is intimately associated with blackness in the U.S. context.” Finally, as a work also in Cuban American literary and cultural studies, this book foregrounds the other experience of an Afro-Cuban American literature and performance to add to the insights of Rodrigo Lazo, Ricardo Ortiz, and Laura Lomas in their recent publications on the movements—around the hemisphere, within the United States—of Cuban American literary and print cultures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the first part of the book, I present archival research to evidence an Afro-Cuban American modernism in performance. I draw on perspectives in African-diaspora studies regarding the archive, whose material and discursive conditions, in the context of the plantation system in the Americas, Édouard Glissant limns: “The obligation to get around the [plantation’s] rule of silence,” he writes, “gives rise everywhere to a literature that has no ‘natural’ continuity, if one may put it that way, but rather bursts forth in torn-off fragments [*fragments arrachés*].” Such *fragments arrachés* are material, seen and felt in the manuscripts of an archival box, heard in the sounds of a performance recorded on tape. They take immaterial form, too, in that they intimate the “discursive
system that governs and regulates the production and appearance" of African-diasporic knowledge across the slavery and postslavery institutions of the Americas. Chapter 1 discusses the fragments arrachés of Alberto O’Farrill, the blackface actor and writer who appeared on the teatro bufo (Cuban minstrelsy) stage at the Apolo and Campoamor theaters in Harlem and in the New York City Latino newspapers La Prensa (as a subject of reviews) and El Gráfico (as a writer) from the 1920s to the 1930s. I tell the story of O’Farrill’s arrival in the United States via Key West and how it appeared to allow him a career (otherwise closed off in Cuba) in the transnational teatro bufo—by then a belated, however popular, form of troubling racial representation. The traces in La Prensa of O’Farrill’s “negro-on-negro” performances in Cuban American versions of the teatro bufo at the Apolo evince an awareness of his afrolatinidad. In his own autobiographical-fictional writings in Gráfico, an important Latino publication of the period, O’Farrill goes further: he produces an Afro-Latino “blackface print culture” that conflicts with the culturalist, postracial assumptions of a raza hispana (Hispanic race), the pan-Latino ideology of the day. I finish the chapter with a reflection on O’Farrill’s performance in No matarás (Thou Shalt Not Kill), a 1935 film that emerges from his work on the Campoamor stage and offers a rare glimpse of his moving, speaking, indeed, singing and dancing body. Chapter 2 recovers Eusebia Cosme, the poetry performer and actress. By 1938, Cosme was famous in the Hispanophone Caribbean for her stagings of poesía negra (black poetry), the verse of predominantly white and mixed-race men that sought to represent the popular cultures and identities of Afro–Latin Americans. Yet, in August of that very year, Cosme migrated to the United States, where she spent the majority of her life, a sign, I suggest, of the way in which an Afro-Cuban woman such as herself dealt with the scarcity of career opportunities on the island. Her performances in the United States pushed poesía negra beyond its own belated situation over the course of the 1940s, which I recollect in radio scripts and the trace of a sound recording—a career that benefited, in particular, from Cosme’s contacts with African Americans through print-culture spaces such as the Chicago Defender, relationships with such figures as Langston Hughes, and in venues such as the auditorium of Washington, DC’s Armstrong High School, all of which occasioned Cosme’s afrolatinidad, in tension with island-Cuban representations of her racial identity, including Fernando Ortiz’s “mulata” appellation. To emphasize the history and politics of my critical recovery, I offer the remarks of the Anglo-white woman who “discovered” a poststroke,
disabled Cosme in Mexico City and was responsible for gathering her effects and sending them to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, at the New York Public Library, an itinerary I follow as well in the alternative path that Cosme’s own body took to Miami, where she died in 1976. A major element of Cosme’s biography is her admission into a film career late in life, first in Sydney Lumet’s *The Pawnbroker* and later in Mexican productions, most famously in *El derecho de nacer* (The Right to Be Born), which I attend to as examples, however loaded, of Cosme’s admirable commitment to finding and doing work in the arts, against the odds.

In the subsequent three chapters, the second part of the book, I examine the signs of race in Cuban American writing and popular culture after the midcentury. Chapter 3 sees in the way Afro-Cuban Americans identify—indeed, pass—as mainland Afro–Puerto Ricans still another turn in the discourses of afrolatinidad. Central here is how such “boricua identifications” appear in the secondary works of major Afro-Cuban American figures or in secondary ways of reading their most recognized works: the elements of a “supplementary career.” Thus, the 1940s publications on Afro-Cuban religion by the anthropologist Rómulo Lachatañeré become significant in a new way when seen through the archival remnants of their voyage through the peer-review process, where Lachatañeré manages the U.S. institutions of an anthropology on the African diaspora in a way that gestures toward his afrolatinidad. With Lachatañeré, an Afro-Latino identity and professional interest become increasingly associated with mainland Puerto Ricans, culminating in his secondary career in photography, particularly in the photographic documentation of Puerto Ricans in Harlem and on the island of Puerto Rico itself, the journey to which ended in a tragic boricua identification: Lachatañeré’s death in an airplane crash off San Juan in 1952. As literary narrative, a boricua identification intensifies in *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas, whose Afro-Cuban American father appears in the text as a mainland Afro–Puerto Rican, a sign of the exigencies of the 1960s “ethnic-literature” book market and of U.S.-imperial relations between Cubans and Puerto Ricans, marked by amicability and enmity. Chapter 4 turns to the period and texts around 1979 in Miami and the overlapping histories of the illicit drug trade, African American uprising, Mariel migration, and my family. In a personal-critical narrative, I consider how the presence of Afro-Cubans in the Mariel migration panicked the old-guard Cuban exile regarding its purchase on Cuban American whiteness. A spicexploitative response to Mariel appeared in
the 1983 film *Scarface*, which put its lead actor, Al Pacino, in brownface, as the Mariel migrant Antonio Montana, a minstrel moment whose lineage involves the Jewish American Paul Muni’s Italianface performance in the 1932 version of the film and, moving forward in time, African American and Afro-Cuban American appropriations of Montana in rap music, which amplified the Cuban exile’s original fear. These acts of a *Scarface* minstrelsy, as the seeming idolizing of the drug-violence corpse of Antonio Montana, commemorate other corpses as well, such as that of Arthur McDuffie, the African American whose murder by the police led to the 1980 African American “riot.” Cuban American whiteness is the focus of chapter 5, in which autobiographical narratives of a voyage back to Cuba during the post-Soviet 1990s by white, middle-class, Cuban American academics lead to a return to the family house left behind, now lived in by island Afro-Cubans. This trope of the “Afro-Cuban-occupied house” seems to leave us with yet another representation of Afro-Cubans in the white Cuban American text; in fact, it discloses Cuban American whiteness and its basis, textured here by the complexities of the autobiographical plot, in social and economic privilege. A counternarrative of an Afro-Cuban American return to the island, the video *Cuban Roots/Bronx Stories*, further frays the edges of going back in the Cuban American imaginary. In the conclusion, I look to someone who very much has become a recognizable figure in our discussions of Afro-Cuban American literature, Evelio Grillo, the author of *Black Cuban, Black American: A Memoir*. With my interview of Grillo, and with an examination of the unheralded antecedents of his book, I suggest what may remain as we search forward and back in afrolatinidad.