

## *Number 15 (Summer 1995)*

experience the magic and escape, if but temporarily, the harsh realities of their lives.

Rhodes' *Voodoo Dreams* is a remarkable achievement. Through her vivid imagery, the reader experiences another world. The characters are so tangible they walk off the page, multi-dimensional and real, carrying with them the fears that direct their lives. *Voodoo Dreams* is an effective weaving of myth, magic, and fiction into art.

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**Beatriz Rivera. *African Passions and Other Stories.* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1995) 168 pp., \$9.95 paper.**

In recent years there have been many novels, collections of short stories, and editions of poetry published by Mexican-Americans, but the works by Cuban-Americans have not been as plentiful. *African Passions*, the first published collection by Beatriz Rivera, is a promising but not altogether satisfying contribution to the corpus of Cuban-American writing. It is sometimes brilliant and imaginative, sometimes not very inspiring, with eight stories (several of which are interrelated) ranging from the humorous and well-conceived to the rather tedious.

The best is the title piece, which chronicles the demise of a long-term relationship between a Cuban-American couple from different socio-economic backgrounds. As the pair seeks a burial place for a dead cat, they are accompanied by the Afro-Cuban gods of Santeria (akin to the more widely-known practice of Voodoo) who, summoned by the woman, provide a humorous view of the gods and their activities in her support. Several stories are about the pursuit of the "American Dream" and the degree of success or failure of that pursuit among Cubans. The best of these is "Once in a Lifetime Offering," where Kiki (also a minor character in another tale) finds herself caught up in a typical American middle class career chase. Her pursuit is also one of identity terminating in her voyage to Cuba, an act which causes her friends to declare: "Normally, people leave their countries to find jobs here... This is the land of opportunity. So what does she expect? To find a job in Cuba?"

The weakest story is "Bells," in which Cristina pursues another kind of dream, that of finding the perfect man. She is a wealthy over-achiever (PhD., world traveler, Spanish language television reporter, Jujitsu expert) who is so exasperating that in the end the reader is left indifferent to her fate. "The Battery-Operated Drummer Bear" is about Cristina's father, an overbearing millionaire advertising executive who claims to have invented the term "Spanish Market."

## *Explorations in Sights and Sounds*

Two good selections that are relevant to readers of ethnic experiences are "Grandmother's Secret" and "Paloma." The former does a respectable job of delineating family ties and local color in the Cuban-American community while it also depicts the differences between the older generation of immigrants and the assimilated generation of their grown children. The latter focuses on the experiences and plight of the huge number of illegal Hispanics in the United States. Although it is sometimes confusing to follow, it contains some of the most poetic writing in *African Passions*. It suffers, as do several other stories, from too many characters, too many complicated relationships, and too little character and story development.

The author presents a portrait of a dozen or so willful, occasionally obsessed women, regularly amusing, sometimes tired, and relentlessly driven. Even with the shortcoming noted, Beatriz Rivera shows a great deal of promise of becoming a significant voice in the growing Cuban-American literary community.

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## **Clovis E. Semmes. *Cultural Hegemony and African American Development*. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992)**

The purpose of this book is to examine cultural aspects of hegemonic relations between White Americans and African Americans, a neglected topic which the author believes should provide the basis for African American Studies programs. Although Semmes establishes culture as the focus of his analysis, political and economic forces are clearly important for understanding the position of Black Americans in the changing social organization of the United States. Defined as regularity in subjective states, culture is theorized as interacting with social organization, as institutional settings frame cultural expressions and vice versa.

Despite the rather narrow definition of culture, the author analyzes a wide variety of cultural forms and elements related to Black American experience. These include both routine activities and artistic work as well as the constraints on cultural expression at different points in time, the availability of resources to support cultural creativity, the effects of positive forms, and the reasons for maladaptive ones.

Critical to the author's argument about the centrality of culture is the notion of cultural hegemony, the systemic negation of one culture by another, which forms one end of a dialectical process whose manifestation is dehumanization. Cultural hegemony is theorized to create the need for cultural reconstruction among Blacks, a life-affirming, humanizing response to cultural negation. This theoretical approach is offered