Lucia Ortiz celebrates the African influence on Latin America
Growing up in Colombia, Spanish professor Lucia Ortiz was completely unaware of the “invisible” population who contributed so much to her country’s lush identity and culture. Then she discovered *Changó, the Biggest Badass.*

The historical novel by Afro-Colombian author Manuel Zapata Olivella, published in 1983 and widely considered to be a masterpiece, tells the story of the African diaspora in the Americas over a period of five centuries, from the slave trade in western Africa through the civil rights movement in the United States, with special attention to its impact on Latin America.

**THE COLOR of CULTURE**

Ortiz was at Boston University, working on her dissertation about Colombian history as seen through late 20th-century literature, when she first read the 500-page epic. She learned about her country’s age-old mistreatment of Afro-Colombians, the blacks whose ancestors were brought as slaves in the 1700s to work the mines or in the sugarcane fields. And she realized just how much of her country’s customs, foods, and traditions are influenced by African, as well as indigenous and Spanish, cultures.

“The author concludes that all Latin Americans are a ‘hybrid’ being, part indigenous, part Spanish, part African,” says Ortiz. “I was just fascinated by it. It was not anything I learned in school.”

Because so much of African culture has melded with Colombian culture, the prevailing view is that Colombia is integrated and discrimination does not exist, Ortiz explains. In fact, she says, Afro-descendents of Colombian society have been “made invisible.” For example, Cumbia music, now considered representative of the country, started as a courtship dance among the slave population living along eastern Colombia’s Caribbean coast. The distinctive African drumbeats later mixed with strains of Spanish guitar and the melodic pipes of indigenous pre-Colombians and became a truly multicultural art form. “People think, ‘We dance Cumbia. We’re not racist,’” Ortiz says. “But it’s not true; you see racism at all levels. The degrees of skin pigmentation were always very important, and are still very important.”

By Kim Asch
“You see racism at all levels. The degrees of skin pigmentation were always very important, and are still very important.”

“The process of gathering their stories, I learned so much about the impact of these women on Latin American culture.”

Known for her intellectual rigor and the high standards she sets for both herself and her students, Ortiz can often be overheard around the Spanish department assessing, with certain zeal, the montón de trabajo, or huge mountain of work, awaiting her.

Ortiz’s work on the forefront of the emerging field of Afro-Colombian literature, and the still narrower field of Afro-Latina literature, is well recognized, and she was even invited to a reception with Colombia’s president.
Virginia Murature, an aspiring Argentine singer and actress, had high hopes. But she also had a disadvantage few other artists did in Buenos Aires in the 1980s and 1990s, according to an essay by Adriana Genta in Lucia Ortiz’s upcoming book, Daughters of the Muntu: Critical Biographies of Afro-Descendent Women from Latin America. Murature was black. She supported herself by day working as an administrative assistant, but after hours, she practiced her craft, rehearsed her lines, and won parts—often minor—in stage works. Most of the theatrical presentations crafted or produced in Argentina had few opportunities for black performers.

Perseverance paid off for Murature, and she rejoiced when she told friends she was finally able to quit her day job and devote herself entirely to the theater she so loved. The emancipation was short-lived. She struggled to win parts. Adriana Genta recounts how she lost contact with Murature, but when, in the early 1990s, a theatrical group prepared to put on a production about the struggle among black Argentine slaves to win their freedom, she immediately thought of Murature. Genta tracked down an aunt and inquired about Murature’s whereabouts. “Virginia?” the aunt asked. “Virginia gave up hope.” Murature in 1990 had thrown herself beneath the wheels of a train and had been killed instantly. She’d tired of waiting for the ideal role for a black actress—or, for that matter, of directors who insisted on casting her only in the role of a black actress.

The play went on. Women, black and white, Argentine, Uruguayan, and Chilean, worked at the script and the production and made a triumphant debut in April 1995. The subject of the production, the labor of women united despite their differences of race and nationality, was a constant reminder of the open wounds that Murature’s heartbreak and demise had left.