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**'BLACK ATLANTIC' CULTURAL POLITICS AS REFLECTED IN  
PANAMANIAN LITERATURE**

**A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**Sonja Stephenson Watson  
August 2005**

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## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderful husband and best friend Mr. Marcus Jermaine Watson, my loving parents Mr. and Mrs. Willie and Millie Stephenson, my sister and confidant Dr. Becky L. Stephenson and to my friend and colleague, Ms. Lori Celaya, all of whom have been with me since the beginning of this intellectual journey.

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### **Abstract**

The diaspora experience is characterized by hybridity, diversity and above all, difference. The nature of the diaspora experience therefore precludes an exclusive articulation of identity. Black identity in Panama is one characterized by this same multiplicity. My dissertation examines race, culture, and ethnicity in the development of Panamanian national identity and is informed by the critical theories of Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and Frantz Fanon. The articulation of Afro-Panamanian identity is both intriguing and complex because there are two groups of blacks on the Isthmus: Spanish-speaking blacks who arrived as a result of slavery (15<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> centuries) and English-speaking blacks who migrated from the West Indies to construct the Trans-isthmian Railroad (1850-1855) and Panama Canal (1904-1914).

The country's cultural and linguistic heterogeneity not only enriches the study of Panama and illustrates that it is a nation characterized by multiplicity, but it also captures the complexity of the African Diaspora in the Americas. This plurality is evidenced in Afro-Panamanian literary discourse from its inception in the late nineteenth century to the present. This study analyzes the representation of Afro-Hispanics and Afro-Antilleans during different time periods in Panamanian literature, the literature written by Afro-Hispanics, and the literature written by Afro-Antilleans which emerged during the latter half of the twentieth century. Finally, I address how the discourse of both groups of blacks converge and diverge.

Panamanian literature has been grossly understudied. While its history, geography, and political ties to the United States have been examined extensively by intellectuals from the United States and Latin America, with the exception of a few studies, its literature has been virtually ignored by the Hispanic literary canon. Within the field of Afro-Hispanic literature, black Panamanian literature has also been understudied. With the exception of works published about Gaspar Octavio Hernández, Carlos Guillermo Wilson, and Gerardo Maloney, Afro-Panamanian literature has not been examined comprehensively. My dissertation seeks to fill this void in the field of Afro-Hispanic literature and, hopefully, it will enrich the field of Latin and Central American literature and literary criticism.

**Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter one: The Rhetoric of Nation and the Invisibility of Blackness in the New Republic of Panama</b> .....	21
<b>Chapter two: The Black Image in Early Twentieth-Century Panamanian Literature</b> .....	67
<b>Chapter three: The Social Protest Novels of Joaquín Beleño Cedeño: A Study of the Inherent Conflicts and Contradictions of Anti-imperialism and Negritude in the Canal Zone</b> .....	94
<b>Chapter four: The Afro-Caribbean Works of Carlos "Cubena" Guillermo Wilson and his (Re) Vision of Panamanian History</b> .....	140
<b>Chapter five: Race, Language, and Nation in the Works of Three Contemporary Panamanian West Indian Writers: Gerardo Maloney, Melva Lowe de Goodin, and Carlos E. Russell</b> .....	175
<b>Conclusion: Afro-Panamanian Discourse: From Invisibility to Visibility</b> .....	217
<b>List of References</b> .....	222
<b>Vita</b> .....	247

## Introduction

Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* defines the 'Black Atlantic' as "a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British but all of these at once" (3). Gilroy's metaphor describes the multiplicity of the black diaspora and the difficulty in articulating a single collective identity. The nature of the diaspora experience precludes an exclusive articulation of identity. As the black British cultural critic Stuart Hall notes, the diaspora experience is one shaped by hybridity, heterogeneity, diversity, and difference (235). Black identity in Panama is one characterized by this same multiplicity.

Panama, much like its Central American neighbor Costa Rica, possesses a unique history characterized by various migrations of blacks, both forced and voluntary to the Isthmus, originating in the colonial period and ending after the construction of the Panama Canal in 1914. Blacks in Panama are divided into two cultural groups that migrated to the Isthmus during different time periods: one during the colonial period (15th-18th centuries), and the other during the constructions of the Trans-isthmian Railroad (1850-1855) and the French (1880-1890) and North American Canals (1904-1914).<sup>1</sup> The two groups, identified as Afro-Hispanics and Afro-Antilleans respectively,

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<sup>1</sup> Although this study is primarily concerned with West Indians in the Canal Zone, there also exists a group of English-speaking blacks in Bocas del Toro located on the northwestern coast of Panama. Their history dates back to the early nineteenth century. According to Michael Conniff, in the early 1800s West Indians came as slaves with their British masters who migrated to the region of Bocas del Toro as planters (16). The West Indian migration resumed in the region of Bocas del Toro during the establishment of the United Fruit Company in 1899 which also operated in the coastal city of Puerto Limón, Costa Rica.

differ not only culturally, but also linguistically since the majority of the latter group speaks English.<sup>2</sup>

These migrations not only make the concept of blackness in Panama problematic within the national discourse, but they create internal problems within the black community itself. There are cultural and linguistic differences between the Afro-Hispanics and the predominately English-speaking Afro-Antilleans. Furthermore, the black West Indians are a heterogeneous ethnic group because they are composed of blacks from the English-speaking Antilles of Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, and the French-speaking Antilles of Martinique and Guadalupe. As Richard Jackson asserts: "Black identity is probably more complicated in Central America than anywhere else in this hemisphere, given the added Afro-Caribbean factors of color, language, and culture" (*Black Writers and the Hispanic* 73). This cultural and linguistic plurality further illustrates Gilroy's paradigm which resists limiting blacks to one cultural, racial, or ethnic group while celebrating their multiplicity and, above all, their difference.

While Gilroy's paradigm permits the analysis of the problematic of multiplicity, the model, as suggested by James Clifford and Lourdes Martínez-Echazábal, fails to include black South America, and it is more representative of the black 'North Atlantic' because of its British and North American emphasis (320, 121). Despite this oversight, Gilroy's model illustrates the transatlantic and transnational experience that characterizes the black diaspora. As Dorothy Mosby observes: "In spite of Gilroy's geographic concentration on transatlantic movements and communication among diaspora blacks in

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this study, I use the term Afro-Hispanic to refer to blacks of colonial descent and the terms Afro-Antillean, Afro-Caribbean, West Indian and Afro-West Indian to describe the black English and French-speaking population who migrated from the Caribbean.

England, the United States, and the Anglophone Caribbean (particularly Jamaica and Guyana), the concepts he explores may be applied to the 'other America' in the black South Atlantic and to migrations to non-metropolitan centers such as Costa Rica, Panama, and Nicaragua" (234). Thus, Gilroy's paradigm demonstrates that the diaspora experience as described by Stuart Hall "is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (235).

The diaspora experience is further complicated in a country such as Panama that is characterized by multiple diasporas in which blacks brought various cultures and languages to the Isthmus. These multiple diasporas problematize the concepts of race, ethnicity, and nation in a country that did not receive its full independence until 1903. That is to say, although Panama gained its independence from Spain in 1821 and joined Simón Bolívar's *Gran Colombia* with the right to maintain its own government, Colombia never recognized Panama as an autonomous nation (Szok *La última* 76). Thus, Panama's nation-building project that began in the nineteenth century was characterized by both cultural and political contradictions.

Moreover, one should bear in mind that since the Spanish conquest of the New World, the Isthmus of Panama has served as a primary route of commerce and communication between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Until late in colonial times, the isthmian crossing served as the major thoroughfare for trade between Spain and its colonies in western South America. The narrowest link between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, Panama's geographical position has shaped the country's external, economic, and social relations (Priestley "Post-Invasion" 85). As Gerardo Maloney

notes: "El elemento básico de la formación social panameña, es y ha sido la explotación de su posición geográfica" ("Panamá 1920" 7). As a result, Panama envisioned itself as a nation whose progress was tied to its geography.

Colombia's distance from Panama, its geographical ties to South America instead of Central America, and its failure to recognize Panama as a sovereign nation led to Panama's desire for independence and complete autonomy. In *El estado federal de Panamá* (1855), Justo Arosemena was the first who articulated Panamanian nationalism and the country's desire to become a sovereign nation. During the federalist period (1855-1885), Panama realized its dream of becoming what Peter Szok calls a "Hanseatic Republic," "a place of international transit, and community traditionally dependent on its close interaction with foreigners" (*La última* 121).

Panama's "Hanseatic" dream was restored in 1850, a date which marked an important milestone in Panamanian history with the abolishment of slavery and the commencement of the construction of the Trans-isthmian Railroad which would connect the opposite shores of the Americas. From 1850 to 1855, thousands of black West Indians migrated to Panama in search of better opportunities and economic prosperity. During this period, more than 45,000 Jamaicans came to the Isthmus along with workers from Grenada, England, Ireland, France, Germany, Austria, India, and China. The attempted construction of the French Canal from 1880-1889 would bring 84,000 more Jamaicans to the Isthmus. After France's failure, the United States intervened with the agreement to complete construction of the Canal and supported Panama in its independence from Colombia. On November 3, 1903, Panama seceded from Colombia and became a protectorate of the United States. The United States remained on the

Isthmus from 1904 to 1914 during the arduous construction of the Canal and imported as many as 19,900 workers from Barbados as well as a small number of workers from Martinique, Guadalupe, and Trinidad.

After the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914, Latin America, as well as other countries, perceived Panama as a United States territory devoid of its Hispanic heritage. Determined to defend itself as a Hispanic territory, Panama reaffirmed its *hispanidad* by utilizing neocolonial architecture, constructing a monument of Cervantes in 1923, and by naming its currency the *balboa*, in honor of the *conquistador* of the Isthmus, Vasco Núñez de Balboa (Szok *La última* 99). All of these things were done with the hope that the outside world would recognize Panama as a unified Hispanic nation. Moreover, *hispanidad* became a major tenet of Panamanian nationalism with the aim of whitening Panamanian culture (94).

Panamanian nationalists desired to rid themselves of anything that did not reflect a nationhood of unified people, that is, a *mestizo*, Catholic, and Spanish-speaking republic. Religion, language, and Hispanic culture marked the major differences between the West Indians and the other Panamanians, including the Afro-Hispanics. Indeed, West Indians presented a threat to the unity that Panamanian nationalists and intellectuals desired. The thousands of protestant English-speaking West Indian immigrants who migrated to the Isthmus during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to help build the nation were now viewed as a threat to the nation-building project. In the eyes of many nationalists, West Indians were not willing to assimilate, that is, to speak Spanish and intermarry, as many of the Afro-Hispanics had done centuries before. Their continued use of the English language, their construction of English-speaking protestant

churches, and their high rates of intermarriage demonstrated that West Indians were a threat to the *mestizo* nation.

The anti-West Indian sentiment led to the derogatory term *chombo* which was used exclusively to characterize Afro-Antilleans and not Afro-Hispanics.<sup>3</sup> This term is recuperated and explored in Carlos Guillermo Wilson's (1941) diaspora novel *Chombo* (1981). In *Chombo*, Wilson recalls the contributions of black West Indians on the Isthmus and demonstrates that the anti-West Indian sentiment is perpetuated by Afro-Hispanics and, in his opinion, is worse because they share a common origin: Africa.

Olmedo Alfaro's *El peligro antillano en la América Central* (1924) articulated an anti-West Indian sentiment and defended the difference between the two groups of blacks on the Isthmus. According to Alfaro:

Es evidente que hay gran diferencia entre el negro antillano y el hombre de color desarrollado dentro de la civilización Indo-Americana, no solamente por su status en las vecinas colonias inglés así donde su situación económica es deprimente y sus salarios ridículos, sino también por el ambiente de respeto de que en nuestras sociedades disfrutaban las razas de color, consideraciones que les han sido acordadas por la nobleza de su carácter y su asimilación a nuestras más altas virtudes morales. (7)

These comments reflect the opposition to black West Indians. The message is clear: unlike Afro-Hispanics, Afro-Antilleans were culturally and linguistically different from other Panamanians and did not reflect *hispanidad*. These sentiments contributed to

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<sup>3</sup> *Chombo* is a racial term of disrespect designed specifically for West Indians. However, the term can be used affectionately.

several laws directed against all those who did not reflect the nation-building project. In 1926, law 13 prohibited non Spanish-speaking blacks and Asians from entering the country. In 1941, President Arnulfo Arias made it a requirement to speak Spanish to become a citizen. West Indians were encouraged to give up their own culture and adopt that of Panama or leave (Conniff 4). As a result, many West Indians decided to repatriate to their native homelands.

Because Afro-Antilleans were viewed as incompatible with the Panamanian nation, Afro-Antilleans, such as George Washington Westerman (1910-1988), a prominent sociologist, encouraged young West Indians to integrate into the Panamanian nation by adopting the major tenets of *panameñidad*: language, culture, and religion. This assimilation project lasted from the 1940s to the 1960s and aimed at economic improvement (Barrow *Piel oscura* 95). West Indians who came to the Isthmus as young adults reacted differently to the integrationist and assimilation project as many felt that assimilation would result in the eventual loss of their political, economic, cultural, and linguistic ties to the Caribbean.

These differences have created years of tension between the two groups of blacks on the Isthmus despite attempts in the last two decades of the twentieth century to resolve their differences and promote a black Panamanian nationalism that incorporates both the Afro-Hispanic and the Afro-Antillean into the national paradigm. This tension, along with the years of rejection and the attempts of integration and assimilation, has created a polemic about the use of the term Afro-Panamanian to describe all Afro-descendant populations in Panama. While many Afro-Hispanics celebrate the term, there is some dissention among West Indians because, in their opinion, the term promotes assimilation

and, therefore, denies their Caribbean ancestry (Barrow *Piel oscura* 215). The use of this category, as well as West Indian assimilation, is explored by the Panamanian West Indian writer and political scientist Carlos E. Russell (1934) in his book-length essay, *The Last Buffalo*: “*Are Panamanians of Caribbean Descent an Endangered Species?*” (2003), which will be studied in chapter five. His essay, as well as the writings of other contemporary Panamanian West Indians, illustrates the importance of the Caribbean when articulating Panamanian national discourse.

***Caribbean, West Indian, and the "Question of Names"<sup>4</sup>***

In his ground-breaking study, *Central American Writers of West Indian Origin* (1984), Ian I. Smart analyzed literature written by black writers of Anglophone Caribbean descent from Panama and Costa Rica. In the introduction to his study, Smart proposed that the term "West Indian," which has "a real but unfrequently unstated connotation of blackness," be used interchangeably with "Caribbean" since "the majority of the people in the Caribbean area are, in fact, of African origin" (*Central American* 12). Although Smart is correct when he states that the term "West Indian" has a connotation of blackness, an explanation corroborated by Barbadian writer and critic Edward Brathwaite, his analysis fails when he claims that both "West Indian" and "Caribbean" evoke blackness (Brathwaite *Roots* 40).

Indeed, the term "West Indian" most often refers to the English-speaking populations of the "Caribbean" because "to be West Indian is to be Anglophone and black" (Mosby 21). However, the term "Caribbean" possesses multiple meanings and

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<sup>4</sup> In *Central American Writers of West Indian Origin* (1984), Ian Smart uses the phrase “The Question of Names” to initiate his discussion on the synonomous use of the term West Indian with Caribbean to describe the West Indian population in Panama and Costa Rica.

carries with it various geographic, linguistic, cultural, and racial implications that must be specified according to the region being discussed. The term "Caribbean" not only refers to the Anglophone, Francophone, and/or Hispanophone archipelago, but it also makes reference to various racial and ethnic groups. Thus, the term "Caribbean" does not carry the same racial implications as "West Indian" and therefore does not exclusively denote Africanness.

Nevertheless, Smart's analysis remains important for this study because he is the first to publish a book on literature of Central American writers of West Indian origin which notes the importance of Panama's and Costa Rica's relationship to the archipelago. One must bear in mind that a significant portion of Afro-Panamanian and Panamanian identity is comprised of the Afro-Caribbean cultural element. The connection between the Caribbean and Latin America is not only apparent in Panama, but also in other Latin American countries. According to Antonio Benítez –Rojo, "the Antilles are an island bridge connecting, in 'another way,' North and South America" (*The Repeating Island 2*). Benítez-Rojo's (re)reading of the Caribbean explains the cultural phenomenon in Panama and the country's cultural, linguistic, and ethnic affiliation with the Caribbean. This cultural phenomenon is explained by the Panamanian historian, Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, who claims that "el país panameño denota poseer alma caribeña a través de su idiosincracia cultural, de su música, y de su modus vivendi..." ("Latinoamérica" 199).

One must bear in mind that the Caribbean referenced by Benítez-Rojo is not the one that constitutes the West Indian population of Panama. His analysis makes references to the Hispanophone Caribbean and not the Anglophone Caribbean, which comprises a majority of the Afro-Caribbean population in Panama. In effect, the texts

analyzed in this study illustrate that the Anglophone Caribbean constitutes an integral part of Panamanian culture and identity and contributes to its cultural, linguistic, and ethnic hybridity and heterogeneity. While the Anglophone Caribbean may complicate the articulation of black Panamanian identity, as Richard Jackson suggests, it also makes for a rich literary tradition. This will further enrich the reading of the works of Panamanian West Indian writers who emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century. Not only does this illustrate the plurality of Panamanian culture, it facilitates our understanding of Afro-Panamanian discourse which is embedded in this tradition.

At the same time that Panama's history makes for a rich heterogeneous country, its distinct migrations have complicated race relations in Panama and impeded the articulation of a single collective identity. The nationalistic project to Hispanicize all Panamanians failed to realize that Panama was, and continues to be, a multiethnic, multiracial, multilingual, and multicultural nation. Black identity in Panama is complicated as a result of various migrations to the Isthmus and has created two distinct literary traditions. The development of the two traditions that share the common origin of Africa, but differ linguistically and culturally and complicate the articulation of black Panamanian identity, will be analyzed in my dissertation. This study, however, involves more than Panama. One needs to bear in mind that the differences inherent in black Panamanian identity, which are reflected in the literature, constitute a microcosm of the black diaspora experienced throughout the Americas.

### ***Organization of the Dissertation***

My dissertation will analyze the development of black Panamanian literature. This study is rooted in Afro-Hispanic criticism which considers the factors of race and

ethnicity in relation to the formation of national identity. When reading literature about blacks and, most importantly, when reading literature written by black writers, race can not be ignored. Richard Jackson asserts: "Whether in the Hispanic Caribbean or in Central and South America, race is the fundamental issue in Afro-Hispanic literature" (*Blacks Writers and the Hispanic* 2). Race and ethnicity will be considered in the readings of literature written by blacks and non blacks in Panama in order to articulate another facet of the black diaspora. Specifically, this dissertation will analyze the following themes: the representation of Afro-Hispanics and Afro-Antilleans during different time periods in Panamanian literature, the literature written by Afro-Hispanics, the literature written by Afro-Antilleans which emerges during the latter half of the twentieth century, and finally, how the discourses of Afro-Hispanics and Afro-Antilleans converge and diverge.

Chapter one, "The Rhetoric of Nation and the Invisibility of Blackness in the New Republic of Panama," discusses nineteenth-century Panamanian nation-building and how the national discourse affected the writings of the Afro-Hispanic poets, who as a result, stressed their *panameñidad* through a consciously deracialized discourse. This analysis will focus primarily on the *modernista* poet Gaspar Octavio Hernández (1893-1918), who is considered to be one of Panama's national poets, as well as others such as the mulatto José Dolores Urriola (1834-1883) and Simón Rivas (1867-1914) whose poetry is characterized as escapist according to critics such as Richard Jackson. Richard Jackson, however, has argued that the poetry written by Hernández is particularly significant because it does not openly discuss the problems of race.

The works of these poets will be contrasted with the Afro-Hispanic poet Federico Escobar (1861-1912) who openly discussed his blackness and protested against the social ills of the time period. However it is important to remember that while Gaspar Octavio Hernández's poetry is nationally revered because it is patriotic and nationalistic, Escobar's poetry was less accepted because it "served much to awaken the government of Panama to the trend of unjustifiable practices of the time" (Barton 207).

This chapter will show that while Escobar's poetry exhibited racial consciousness on the Isthmus, the majority of these poets were torn between being blacks who wrote for a white audience on the one hand, and being a part of the nation-building project which stressed *hispanidad* over racial and ethnic particularities, on the other. Thus, their literature was more nationalistic and patriotic than racially-centered, and it focused on Panama's fight for independence from Colombia and its status as an independent nation.

Chapter two, "The Black Image in Early Twentieth-Century Panamanian Literature," discusses the objectification of the black in early Panamanian literature written during the 1920s and 1930s and which coincides internationally with the *poetic negrism* movement. Specifically, the works of the *vanguardista* writers, Víctor M. Franceschi (1931-1984), Demetrio Korsi (1899-1957), and Rogelio Sinán (1904-1994) are analyzed as representative voices of non Afro-Panamanian writers who made an effort to depict blacks in their works.

The poetry of Víctor M. Franceschi (1931 -1984), analyzed from *Carbones* (1956), accentuates the black woman's body and portrays blacks negatively. Similar to other *negrista* writers of the Hispanic Caribbean, the poetry of Franceschi is colored by

stereotypical images of black women that portray her exclusively as the embodiment of the sexual.

Similar to Franceschi's poetry, the poetry of Demetrio Korsi (1899-1957) analyzed primarily from *Los gringos llegan y la cumbia se va* (published in 1953, but written during the 1930s), characterizes blacks as exotic figures who sing and dance. Notwithstanding Korsi's attempts to reproduce the language of blacks on the Isthmus, his representation of the characters never transcends a flawed essentialism. In addition, while Korsi viewed blacks such as Gaspar Octavio Hernández as patriotic, he perceived West Indians to be a threat to Panamanian nationalism. While Korsi's poetry is anti-gringo, pro-African folklore, and pro-Panamanian, he addresses his own preoccupations with the dominant presence of the West Indians and advocates expelling West Indians from Panama.

While Víctor Franceschi's and Demetrio Korsi's poetry treats blacks primarily as exotic figures, the prose of Rogelio Sinán (1904-1994) denounces racial discrimination by employing techniques of surrealism, a movement that originated in France in the 1920s that represented the thoughts of the unconscious mind. In *La boina roja* (1954), a collection of short stories, and *Plenilunio* (1947), his first published novel, Sinán denounces racial prejudice by allowing his characters' subconscious fears of the "Other" to consume their thoughts and lead them to irrational conclusions. For example, in "Todo un conflicto de sangre" (1946), the main character, Mrs. Rosenberg, fears that she is becoming black after she receives a blood transfusion from a black West Indian man, Joe. Her nightmares of becoming black, and more importantly, of the black culture dominating her lifestyle, illuminate her fears of the other culture. Like Mrs. Rosenberg,

Linda Olsen of "La boina roja" (1953) hates blacks. Linda Olsen is a North American woman on a remote island who, after unknown reasons, transforms into a mermaid, becomes pregnant, and gives birth to a dead fetus without knowing if it is black, white, a monster, or a mermaid. The thought of her child being black scares her because of her disdain for the black race. Despite her disdain, Linda is extremely attracted to black men and dreams of sexual encounters that she has had with them. Like Linda, Mrs. Rosenberg shares similar exotic fantasies about the chauffer, Joe, despite her apparent disgust for the black race. In *Plenilunio*, the major character, Elena Cunha, like Rosenberg and Olsen, becomes sexually satisfied with Mack Amargo, a man of dark features, during a dream-like state. "Possessed" by the full moon, Elena does not recall the event even though she is secretly attracted to Mack. These women outwardly deny any attraction towards black men even though their dreams reveal otherwise.

Although Rogelio Sinán's works denounce racial discrimination, his depiction of blacks falls victim to the same essentialisms inherent in Franceschi's and Korsi's poetry. Sinán fails to show character traits of blacks other than their sexuality or involvement in witchcraft. In addition, while Sinán's works denounce racism, the principal characters are from other countries which reinforced the myth that there were no racial problems in Panama.

While Sinán's works denounce racial prejudice, the works of the Afro-Hispanic writer Joaquín Beleño Cedeño (1922-1988) address the anti-*chombo* sentiment that was prevalent on the Isthmus during the 1940s and 1950s. A journalist born to a Panamanian mother and a Colombian father, Joaquín Beleño dedicated his career to exposing the social injustices in the Canal Zone. Although his works have been examined by various

literary critics inside and outside of Panama (e.g., José Carr, James Henry Corliss, Mirna M. Pérez-Venero, Mélida Ruth Sepúlveda, Ian Smart, Diana L. Strom, and Patricia Watkins), none has analyzed his works while taking into account that he is a Panamanian writer of African descent. While these critics have mainly concentrated on Beleño's denouncement of United States imperialism, the U.S. presence in the Canal Zone, or Beleño's depiction of West Indians, a more afrocentric reading of Beleño's works illustrates not only the conflicts between Panamanians and North Americans, but also those between Afro-Antilleans and Afro-Hispanics. In *Central American Writers of West Indian Origin* (1984), Ian Smart argues that Beleño's works are a precursor to literature written by black West Indians because of his portrayal of West Indian life on the Isthmus. Smart's analysis, however, does not consider Beleño's position as a black writer in Panamanian or Afro-Panamanian literature.

The novels *Curundú* (written in 1946 and published in 1963), *Luna verde* (1951) and *Gamboa Road Gang* (1960), or *Los forzados de Gamboa*, make up Beleño's trilogy which is analyzed in chapter three, "The Social Protest Novels of Joaquín Beleño Cedeño: A Study of the Inherent Conflicts and Contradictions of Anti-imperialism and Negritude in the Canal Zone," to explore the representation of blacks by an Afro-Hispanic writer in Panama. *Luna verde* narrates the injustices of the workers in the Canal Zone, and *Curundú* narrates Beleño's personal experiences as a worker in the Canal Zone in Fort Clayton. *Luna verde* reflects the racial problems on the Isthmus, depicts the hatred and animosity among all ethnic groups, and presents a community that is characterized by "[n]egros contra negros. Negros contra latinos. Gringos contra gringos. Latinos devorándose entre sí. *Gold Roll* contra *Silver Roll*" (Beleño 50). The Canal Zone is

presented in Beleño's works as the contemporary plantation, and it demonstrates the omnipresence of the United States along with subsequent threats to an Hispanicized nation.

The last novel of the trilogy, *Gamboa Road Gang* is the most widely known and accurately portrays Zonian racism and anti-West Indian sentiment. *Gamboa* is a fictional work based on the historical account of Lester León Greaves who was accused of raping a white woman and sentenced to fifty years in prison. *Gamboa Road Gang* protests and denounces North American imperialism and examines the search for identity of a black West Indian, Atá, a *mestizo* born to a mother from Barbados and a North American father. He represents the "first generation of children born to West Indian immigrants and blends elements of the West Indies, the United States, and Panama" (Conniff 68).

Beleño's novels of social protest are the first to denounce racial discrimination in the Canal Zone against West Indians and announce the division(s) between Afro-Hispanics and Afro-Antilleans which intensified as a result of the presence of the United States. Black West Indians were able to benefit economically because of their ability to communicate in English. However, it is important to note that racism did not begin with the arrival of the United States. In fact, as in the case of the *gringos*, black West Indians were viewed as threats to *panameñidad* as early as the nineteenth century.

Chapter four, "The Afro-Caribbean Works of Carlos 'Cubena' Guillermo Wilson and his (Re)Vision of Panamanian History," analyzes the works of the black West Indian Carlos Guillermo Wilson, known in literary circles by the pseudonym, Cubena. Wilson is a professor at San Diego State University and has published all of his works while in the United States. Cubena's work is didactic and criticizes race relations on the Isthmus and,

for this reason, "much of his work has been censored in Panama" (Jackson *Black Writers in Latin* 180). I argue that Cubena's texts are dialoguing with Beleño's because Cubena overemphasizes the importance of the West Indian contributions in Panama and desires to redeem the representation of the black West Indian in Panamanian literature.

Cubena's novel *Chombo* (1981), discussed previously, will be analyzed because it is a diaspora novel that blends elements of Africa, the Caribbean, and Panama. The second novel published as part of a trilogy that still lacks completion, *Los nietos de Felicidad Dolores* (1991), is a symbolic call to all grandchildren to remember the past and their origins. In *Los nietos*, Cubena emphasizes the importance of memory and identity.

Cubena's novels do not just address the blacks of Antillean origin, but also the Afro-Hispanics as well. *Chombo* and *Los nietos* illustrate the problems between both groups of blacks and urges them to unite. In *Los nietos*, Cubena emphasizes the lack of unity by spelling *unidos* backwards, *sodinu*, as a reminder to the reader that there remains an unresolved enigma in the black Panamanian community. Indeed, Cubena is on a personal quest for black solidarity, and his novels emphasize cultural diversity on the Isthmus by reflecting the linguistic, cultural, and religious ties to the Caribbean, Africa, and Panama and the race relations experienced in the new homeland. Cubena stresses the common origin of Africa shared by Afro-Antilleans and Afro-Hispanics and hopes that this origin will enable them to put aside their differences and unite.

The last chapter, "Race, Language, and Nation in the Works of Three Contemporary Panamanian West Indian Writers: Gerardo Maloney, Melva Lowe de Goodin and Carlos E. Russell," as the title suggests, treats the effect of race, language,

and nation on the writings of contemporary Panamanian West Indian writers. Like Cubena, the sociologist, essayist, cinematographer, and black West Indian poet, Gerardo Maloney (1945), is concerned with preserving the heritage and memory of black West Indians in Panama and presenting "los personajes y los hechos," as the subtitle of one of his volumes of poetry suggests. His collections of poetry include *Juega vivo* (1984), *Latidos: los personajes y los hechos* (1991), *En tiempo de crisis* (1991) and explore Afro-Panamanian life on the Isthmus.

Such black West Indians as Melva Lowe de Goodin (1945) and Carlos E. Russell (1934) stress the importance of language, memory, place, and nation in their works. Although these writers are interested in remembering their homeland, their works often propose questions of identity, that is, an African and a Caribbean one, in an Hispanicized nation. Their works, like Maloney's, are concerned with preserving their heritage, but unlike him, they emphasize the importance of language in their bilingual (Spanish/English) communities as they seek to maintain linguistic ties to the Caribbean.

Gerardo Maloney (1945), Melva Lowe de Goodin (1945), and Carlos Russell (1934) are West Indians who "find themselves in touch with four cultures, in fact, but not belonging totally to any" (Barton 207). Lowe de Goodin's play *De Barbados a Panamá* (1999), much like Cubena's *Los nietos*, uses memory to remind the present generation of Panamanians where they come from. Lowe de Goodin's play presents Manuelita Martin, a descendant of black West Indians who must write a research paper on the Panama Canal. She is urged by her family members not to write about the United States which is the story that is traditionally told, but to share the "unofficial" story about the workers of the Canal. Manuelita uses the memories of her parents and grandparents to write the

paper which includes not only the North American influence, but also the forgotten West Indian workers who helped in the construction. Manuelita's focus on the West Indian influence in the construction of the Canal makes this piece an historical drama. It also demonstrates the importance of oral traditions and shows us first hand how legends, stories, and histories are passed down from generation to generation.

As for Carlos E. Russell's collections of poetry entitled *Miss Anna's Son Remembers* (1976), *An Old Woman Remembers* (1995), and *Remembranzas y lágrimas* (2001), both are bilingual tributes to "los personajes y los hechos," much like Gerardo Maloney's works. More so than Maloney, Russell brings to light the problems of language and the survival of the Anglophone Caribbean culture in Panama. In his book-length essay, *The Last Buffalo: "Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species?"* (2003), Russell expresses concern over the loss of Caribbeanness in the future generations of Panamanians of West Indian descent. His bilingual works raise questions about writing English in a Spanish colonized territory; furthermore, his use of English and Spanish demonstrates the linguistic hybridity that has characterized these generations. As a result, the works of Russell and Lowe de Goodin also demonstrate that English remains a constitutive part of Panamanian culture, and not just of the black West Indian community.

### ***Justification of Topic***

Panamanian literature is grossly understudied. While its history, geography, and relationship to the United States have been intensely examined by United States and Latin American intellectuals, with the exception of a few studies, its literature has been virtually ignored. Within the field of Afro-Hispanic literature, black Panamanian

literature has also been understudied. With the exception of works published about Gaspar Octavio Hernández, Carlos Guillermo Wilson, and Gerardo Maloney, Afro-Panamanian literature as a whole has not been examined comprehensively. While such critics as Richard Jackson, Elba Birmingham-Pokorny, Ian Smart, Haakayoo Zoggyie, and Carlos Guillermo Wilson have aided in filling this void, Panamanian and Afro-Panamanian literature have been disregarded by the Hispanic literary canon. In addition, to date, no one has published a book or written a dissertation that examines the development of Afro-Panamanian literature. This dissertation will not only fill a void in the field of Afro-Hispanic literature, but it will also contribute to the field of Latin and Central American literary studies.

## Chapter one

### **The Rhetoric of Nation and the Invisibility of Blackness in the New Republic of Panama**

Panama, like other Latin American countries during the nineteenth century, fought for independence and autonomy from Spain. Panama won its independence from Spain in 1821 and joined Simón Bolívar's *Gran Colombia* (i.e., present-day Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela). The desire to liberate itself from Spain was not the only reason why Panama joined *Gran Colombia*. During the nineteenth century, Panama was already known as Colombia's black province (Biesanz "Cultural and Economic" 773). In 1789, 22,504 blacks identified as slaves or free Negroes comprised 63% of the total Isthmian population of only 35,920 people (Deas 273).

Panama's large African population and reputation as a black province troubled the Panamanian European oligarchy during the early nineteenth century, especially in light of the Haitian Revolution (1789-1804) which intensified the oligarchy's fear of its black, indigenous, and mixed populations on the one hand, and its own minority status on the other (Szok *La última* 19). Haiti's occupation of the Dominican Republic and its expulsion of Santo Domingo's European population would alter the construction of race in the Dominican Republic, which later defined itself as a Spanish-speaking non-black nation, the antithesis of Haiti (Derby 7). Haiti would later serve as a model that was not to be followed in Latin America. Representing only twelve percent of the Panamanian population, the *criollos* (European-descended Panamanians) feared that Panama would turn into "another Haiti," a country of blacks (Szok *La última* 19). As a result, Panama's large African population influenced the oligarchy's decision to join *Gran Colombia* in

1821. While constituting a minority elite of the population, the *criollos* sought to secure their position within the new republic by joining the newly formed *Gran Colombia*. Simón Bolívar (1783-1830), the founder of *Gran Colombia*, frequently expressed concern over Haiti and its rebellious blacks, and stressed that it was an example that Latin America should avoid if at all possible (Geggus 48-49). In fact, Bolívar was already preoccupied with Colombia's large African population in the coastal region of Cartagena, where free people of color constituted the majority of the population (Helg 161).

Therefore, race became a major consideration of the Panamanian nation-building project, and its role must be examined in relation to the country's search for nationalistic autonomy during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The discussion of race alone is problematic since "race is a social construction" (Wade *Blackness* 3). In Latin America, race is even more complex given the added factors of color, class, and complexion. In fact, this same plurality complicates the articulation of race and ethnicity in Latin America, and particularly in Panama where indigenous and African components of this nation were eclipsed by *mestizaje*.

### ***Mestizaje and Nation-building***

Like other Latin American countries, Panama defined itself based on centuries of *mestizaje*. In Latin America, the term *mestizo* was used initially to refer to the mixture of the indigenous populations with the white European *conquistadores* (Deas xv). During the nation-building project, which originated in the nineteenth century and extended into the early twentieth century, racial particularities were de-emphasized and the intellectual discourse of *mestizaje* permitted a unified nation based on a "common" group of peoples. As Juan de Castro notes: "...the discourse of *mestizaje*, thus became a way for the three

numerically dominant races living in the Americas--white, Amerindian, and black--to become incorporated into the same national project" (19).

In "*El mestizaje: An All-Inclusive Ideology of Exclusion*," Ronald Stutzman examines the role of *mestizaje* in the small town of Puyo, "a provincial capital located on the western rim of Ecuador's Amazonian interior," and concludes that blacks and indigenous people traded their ethnicity for nationality (45).<sup>5</sup> He argues that *mestizaje*, which secretly hoped for *blanqueamiento*, or whitening, led to the exclusion of the indigenous and black populations. Much of Ecuador's indigenous and African populations internalized this hegemonic discourse and sacrificed their ethnicity for nationality since to be ethnic was considered to be anti-national. As Stutzman acknowledges however, this situation is not unique and "occurs commonly, and not only in Ecuador" (46). Stutzman's analysis of race and nationalism in Ecuador is analogous to the situation in Panama.

In Panama, *mestizaje* reinforced the myth of racial democracy by encouraging intermarriage between the various ethnic groups which resulted in a larger *mestizo* population and a decreasing indigenous and black population. Consequently, *mestizaje* in Panama invisibilized the black masses, and its proponents hoped that blacks would eventually assimilate, intermarry, and generate lighter populations. The Panamanian literary critic Ismael García notes: "El mestizaje es la índole principal de nuestra raza. El blanco, el indio y el negro se mezclaron en la vastedad de un continente y dieron lugar a

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<sup>5</sup> Stutzman lists five thematic components of Ecuadorian nationality that led to the exclusion of ethnicity in Puyo, Ecuador: 1) the nation is centered in the capital, Quito; 2) the nation is urban, and therefore excludes the indigenous peoples that surround the capital; 3) the nation is controlled by a minority elite; 4) the nation is *mestizo*; and 5) cultural change comes from the outside (68-69). Stutzman argues that these five pillars of Ecuadorian nationhood have been accepted as constitutive of *ecuatorianidad* and have served to exclude the indigenous and African populations.

la aparición de un tipo racial distinto al de cada uno de sus componentes" (*Medio siglo* 25). Clearly, *mestizaje* did not celebrate the diverse ethnic composition of the nation, but encouraged assimilation and acculturation which would result in the elimination of the darker populations.

The Afro-Antillean Panamanian educator Armando Fortune described Panama as a *mestizo* nation as well. However, unlike García, Fortune focused on the heterogeneous aspect and not the homogeneous one. He wrote: "El pueblo panameño...es, pues, un conglomerado heterogéneo de diversas gentes, razas y culturas que se agitan, alternan, entremezclan y disgregan en un mismo hervidero social. Panamá es, por tanto, un pueblo mestizo en donde, desde su descubrimiento, siempre ha existido el mestizaje de raza, el mestizaje de cultura y el mestizaje de cocinas" (295). While García viewed *mestizaje* as a cultural fusion that eventually dissolved racial particularities over time, Fortune celebrated and promoted these same differences. As we will show in this chapter, these two competing views of *mestizaje* were especially problematic for the Afro-Hispanic poets writing in Panama during the apogee of the nationalistic movement (1880-1920).

*Mestizaje* shaped Panama and the way Afro-Hispanics view themselves and are viewed by other Panamanians. When discussing the role of *mestizaje* in the formation of racial paradigms in Latin America, Richard Jackson asserts: "This process [mestizaje] ...helped...in the creation of an atmosphere that fosters patriotism and cultural nationalism rather than separatism and black nationalism" (*The Black Image* 92). Furthermore, racial appearance and not African ancestry determines one's racial classification in Latin America (Jackson "Mestizaje" 9). Consequently, the classification of many Panamanians of African descent ranges from *mulato*, *mestizo*, *moreno* to *negro*,

depending on their complexion and presence or absence of African features. Even though the term *mulato* generally refers to the mixture of whites and blacks, *mestizo* is commonly used to designate any combination of the white, indigenous, and African populations and, therefore, ignores racial differences. The terms *moreno* and *negro* refer to people of visible African ancestry, but differ based on the visibility of their African characteristics. The classification of a person of African ancestry as *moreno* or *negro* depends on one's proximity to whiteness or blackness in terms of both color and physical features. For example, many black West Indians are almost always referred to as *negro* because of their dark complexions. Although Afro-Hispanics are almost always referred to as *moreno*, depending on the presence or absence of African features and their position within the color spectrum, they too can be considered *negro*. Obviously, the use of these terms remains ambiguous. Biesanz points out: "Al negro se le llama moreno en situaciones sociales en las que la palabra 'negro' sería un insulto. Moreno se aplica a los antillanos por quienes se siente simpatía o a los negros que hablan español" (*Panamá* 180). In Panama, the term *negro* continues to generate negative connotations that are associated with slavery, Africa, and the West Indian population. For many Afro-Hispanics, to be called *negro* is an insult and implies that they are incompatible with the official national and cultural foundation of the Isthmus.

As a result, *mestizaje* became accepted as an all-inclusive ideology of exclusion and the articulation of race remained ambiguous. Blacks of colonial descent in Panama reflect the process of *mestizaje* and are culturally a part of the Panamanian nation: i.e., they speak Spanish, practice Catholicism, and intermarry. Because blacks of colonial descent were viewed as culturally compatible with their Hispanic counterparts, their

racial and ethnic differences were de-emphasized and their allegiance to the nation was stressed. As Paul Gilroy notes: "The emphasis on culture allows nation and race to fuse. Nationalism and racism become so closely identified that to speak of the nation is to speak automatically in racially exclusive terms" (*Small Acts* 27). Therefore, the *mestizaje* discourse emphasized cultural affiliations and, by extension, a sense of nationality which superseded any specific racial identity.

Consequently, Panamanian nationhood and national identity were based on a sense of racial, cultural, and ethnic commonality. As Radcliffe and Westwood assert: "The imaginary of the nation is usually bound to a fictive ethnicity, organized around an homogenizing account of race and nation" (28). However, Panama's desire to establish itself in Europe's image was difficult because of a decreasing *criollo* population, an increasing black population fueled by high Antillean immigration, and a lack of European immigration. Therefore, West Indian immigration, coupled with Panama's large African population, undermined the official ideology of Panama as a *mestizo* nation. The ethnic composition of the nation was quickly transformed because of the black Protestant English-speaking workers from Jamaica and Barbados who migrated to the Isthmus in search of economic prosperity. The presence of these black Protestant English-speaking workers not only contested the *mestizo* Catholic Spanish-speaking nation, but would also challenge Panama's traditional image as a country of *hispanidad*. To counter these changes, many Panamanian intellectuals ignored the African majority while propagating ideals of an independent republic based on *hispanidad* and not North American and West Indian influences. Furthermore, the influx of West Indians created a problem for the

Panamanian oligarchy who desired to create a nation in the image of Europe (Barrow *Piel oscura* 53-54).

Many black political leaders in Panama during the period of 1880-1920 promoted a nationalistic unity based on an imagined and deracialized cultural homogeneity. Instead of focusing on racial differences, they worked in the name of *panameñidad*. In effect, by insisting on *panameñidad*, these leaders emphasized their cultural, national, and patriotic affiliation with the Isthmus and dismissed the need for any emphasis on race. Because *panameñidad* or cultural nationalism was understood in terms of the customs, habits, religion, and language that Panamanians shared, there was no need to acknowledge racial differences. Armando Fortune noted the connection between *panameñidad* and culture: “La panameñidad es, ante todo y sobre todo, la peculiaridad de la cultura panameña. En términos corrientes, es condición del alma, del espíritu; es complejo de sentimientos, ideas y actitudes” (294). It is no surprise, then, that leaders such as Juan B. Sosa (1870-1920), a prominent black in Panama's Black Liberal Party, and Carlos A. Mendoza (1856-1916), Panama's first black President, "...did not serve as forceful advocates for their own race but instead worked for national unity within the framework of *hispanidad*" (Szok *La última* 101).<sup>6</sup>

Black leaders were not the only group to internalize an all-inclusive ideology of exclusion. This nationalistic discourse which excluded race from the nation-building project influenced writers of African and non-African descent on the Isthmus from the

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<sup>6</sup> Sosa and Mendoza both served in the Black Liberal Party, and held a variety of positions in the Panamanian government. In 1908, Mendoza became second in command under President José de Obaldía and served as President of the Republic from March 1910 to September 1910 after Obaldía's death.

mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. As a result, black writers in Panama were constantly pressured to reconcile a racialized discourse with that of a deracialized and nationalistic one. While some writers openly expressed their blackness during this period, most avoided the topic all together.

Although one may question the need to examine the role of race during Panama's nationalistic movement, when reading literature about blacks and, most importantly, when reading literature written by black writers, race should never be ignored. Antonio Olliz Boyd reminds us: "Black awareness, for Latin American authors, is a thematic contour which is psycholinguistically controlled by race relations in the area" (73). Consequently, this chapter will examine the nation-building project and its effects on racial awareness in the works of Afro-Hispanic writers during the height of the nationalistic movement.

The works of the Afro-Hispanic poets José Dolores Urriola (1834-1883), Federico Escobar (1861-1912), Simón Rivas (1867-1914), and Gaspar Octavio Hernández (1893-1918), illustrate the tension that race created in writing during the formation of the new republic. Not only do their works differ aesthetically, spanning the romantic and *modernista* movements, but as poets their treatment of blackness and ethnicity ran the gamut from no discussion of race to vehement racial affirmation. These early writers were of colonial descent and represent the *hispanicized* blacks who were descendants of slaves. Their references to, or denial of their own negritude, demonstrate the complex nature of being black and of writing during the height of the nationalistic movement. As writers of the new republic who were fighting for independence, they constantly felt the need to sacrifice their own ethnicity for the well-being of the nation. Although each dealt

with blackness in his own way, their treatment of blackness, whether absent or visible, reveals much about being black during Panama's struggle for independence. Considering the factors of race and nation, the poetry of these Afro-Hispanic writers will be analyzed first for their treatment of patriotism, a major theme in all Panamanian literature during this period, and, second, for their acknowledgement or denial of their own negritude. Their works demonstrate the extent to which concepts of race and nation were intertwined during this period. Indeed, it was a constant struggle for these writers to affirm their blackness in their poetry and to maintain their national identity and acceptance by other Panamanians during the formation of the new republic.

***“Panamanian” Romanticism***

During the nineteenth century, Panamanian writers expressed their national allegiance through verse which coincided with romanticism, a literary movement characterized by ideas of liberty, patriotism, evocation of the past, and an exaltation of love in Latin America (Lozano Fuentes 170). Spanish American romanticism flourished after 1830 and replaced the mimetic style and pragmatism of neoclassicism that was rooted in classicism and characterized the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth century. Romanticism challenged classical norms with an emotional, sentimental, and irrational subjectivity that typified the writings of this new literary movement (Rivera-Rodas 13, 63). As Óscar Rivera-Rodas explains: "La poesía tiene su fuente ya no en la realidad natural, sino en la propia emoción del poeta con la cual aquella se impregna" (58).

The emotionally charged lyrics of the romantic poets stemmed largely from their nationalism. This patriotic allegiance was due primarily to the fact that romanticism

coincided with the beginning of the independence of Latin American countries from Spain during the first decades of the nineteenth century (Carilla 21). The question of political identity of the emerging nation-states, therefore, dominated the discourse of several generations of Spanish American romantic writers. Patriotism was a major theme in the poetry written by nineteenth and early twentieth-century Panamanian romantics, and it became important with romanticism because this movement allowed for the exaltation of the fatherland. It is not surprising that Panamanian romanticism, which commenced in the 1850s, reflected the search for national and intellectual autonomy (García *Historia* 40). The essayist Justo Arosemena inspired much of this nationalistic spirit in his work, *El estado federal de Panamá* (1855), which is the first to articulate a consolidation of Panamanian nationality. Before then, Panama attempted to separate from Colombia on three occasions: in 1830, 1831, and 1840, yet rejoined *Gran Colombia* in 1841 (García *Historia* 39).

The "Panamanian" romantic poets were the first major literary generation in Panama (although not the first writers), and their participation in the political movements of the period was noteworthy (Levi 20).<sup>7</sup> The writings of the "Panamanian" romantic poets illustrated the Isthmus' burgeoning nationalistic spirit. For example, the romantic poet Gil Colunje (1831-1899), a representative of the first generation of romantic writers, wrote his own ode to Panama's independence from Spain, entitled "28 de noviembre"(1852), a poem that praised both his country and Bolívar (García *Historia* 41). Jerónimo Ossa (1847-1863) was a member of the second generation of romantic

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<sup>7</sup> I use the term literary generation to classify Panamanian writers by birth and prominent themes that characterized their works.

writers who marked a transition between romanticism and *modernismo*. He wrote "A Panamá" and "Himno nacional" in 1865, both of which celebrated the Isthmus' independence. Patriotism not only characterized the works of mainstream national writers such as Ossa and Colunje, but was also expressed in the writings of Afro-Hispanic poets during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

***"El mulato Urriola:" The Nationalistic Poetry of José Dolores Urriola (1834-1883)***

José Dolores Urriola was a writer of the nineteenth-century struggle for independence and belonged to the first generation of romantic writers. Known as "el mulato Urriola," he was a romantic poet whose poetry dealt with political themes of the time. Urriola participated in political movements during this period and served as the Secretary of the Civil Jury in 1861 (Miró *Cien años* 35). Known for his epigrammatic verse, Urriola's poetry was both popular and satirical and characterized numerous problems of the nineteenth century. Although his poems which appeared largely in newspapers and have been reproduced in various anthologies are few in number, they continue to provide insight into the works of a black poet who wrote during the nation-building project and avoided issues of racial identity.

Urriola's poems "Soneto" and "Sátira contra el General Mosquera" are typical of his epigrammatic verse because of their wittiness and light tone. In "Sátira contra el General Mosquera," Urriola satirized a political figure, Tomás Cipriano de Mosquera (1798-1878), who served at different times as president of *Gran Colombia* between 1845 and 1867. Mosquera was an effective president, but was known to be domineering and violently emotional and, thus, was both revered and feared by the citizens. As a result, Urriola portrayed Mosquera as a ruthless tyrant.

¿Quién más malo que Caín,  
que Judas y Barrabás?

Tomás.

¿Quién más sangriento y tirano  
que Nerón y Diocleciano?

Cipriano.

Sangre y luto por doquiera  
marca tu fatal carrera,

Mosquera.

Más humana es la pantera,  
el tigre menos feroz;  
nadie, nadie es peor que vos  
Tomás Cipriano Mosquera.

(Miró *Cien años* 36)

Urriola dehumanized de Mosquera by comparing him to the most ruthless figures in biblical history such as to Roman tyrants and voracious animals. His "Sátira" sent a political message to a country that desired to separate from *Gran Colombia*. He used poetry to attack, criticize, and satirize politicians as well as the political situation of the period and was committed to Panama's nationalist project. Urriola recognized Panama's marginal position as a member of *Gran Colombia*; after joining *Gran Colombia*, Panama became dissatisfied with Colombia's governing policies which did not recognize the economic potential of Panama's geographical position (Szok *La última* 38). Like "Sátira," "Soneto" is epigrammatic verse and satirizes the impossibility of love. In

“Soneto,” Urriola related the story of a past love and of a woman whom he once idealized. Urriola is remembered as reciting a version of this poem in front of a group of friends (Miró *Cien años* 35).

No pretendáis, amigos, que yo mueva  
 guerra al objeto de mi amor pasado;  
 ni que triste, cobarde y humillado,  
 vaya a poner mi corazón a prueba.  
 ¡Que yo idolatré! No es cosa nueva.  
 ¡Que me dejó por otro! Está probado.  
 Mas...¿quién sabe? ¡Talvez en el pecado  
 la penitencia merecida lleva!  
 No su inconstancia para mí deploro,  
 ni de su fama pésima me río;  
 ni menos formo parte en este coro,  
 que en torno de ella levantáis bravío:  
 ¡pues una dama que se rinde al oro  
 no se merece ni el deprecio mío!

(35-36)

While relating a failed relationship, Urriola did not wallow in self-pity. He declared that a woman who desired money not only did not deserve his attention, but also was not worthy of his loathing. One of the most notable characteristics of the lover in the romantic period was to be a victim of an impossible and fatal love (Jiménez *Romanticismo* 35-36). In a humorous tone, Urriola not only made light of the situation

by minimizing his own despair and rejection, but also satirized his own literary movement because "los románticos sintieron imperiosa la necesidad de amar a la mujer" (35).

Although known as "el mulato," Urriola wrote about current political problems and other non-racial material, but he did not appropriate blackness for himself. Instead, he wrote as a national or romantic poet, and his racial awareness, or lack thereof, was never questioned by him or others. Moreover, Urriola exhibits the national pride inherent in this generation of Afro-Hispanic poets. His texts reinforce Paul Gilroy's previously cited assertion that the emphasis on culture allows nation and race to fuse. Interestingly enough, the poet's identification as *mulato* did not translate into racial awareness or racial consciousness in his works. Despite his African heritage, he was expected, or at least chose, to write for his country and avoid racial identification in his works. As the first writer of African descent to publish poems, and like other "Panamanian" romantic writers, Urriola emulated the literary style of the era.

***"El Bardo Negro:" Federico Escobar (1861-1912)***

As in the case of Urriola, the Afro-Hispanic poet Federico Escobar was also committed to the national project, but instead, he expressed racial awareness in his poetry. Born José del Carmen de los Dolores Escobar, he was a carpenter by trade who worked twenty years for the French Canal (Miró *Cien años* 64). The poet, who liked to be called "el bardo negro," belonged to the second generation of romantic writers and his works possessed both romantic and *modernista* tendencies.<sup>8</sup> During the period of 1880-

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<sup>8</sup> The Panamanian literary critics Rodrigo Miró, Ismael García, and Aristides Martínez Ortega differ in their classification of Escobar as well as other Panamanian writers. While Miró considers him to be a romantic

1920, Panamanian literature experienced the coexistence of both romanticism and *modernismo*. While the majority of Escobar's works are stylistically and thematically romantic, his works do announce many *modernista* themes, such as United States imperialism and Latin America's spiritual strength and supposed superiority over North America. Although Escobar embraces some of the thematic concerns of *modernismo*, his work does not possess the stylistic innovations of the literary movements.

Federico Escobar published several works during his lifetime, including four volumes of poetry: *Hojas secas* (1890), *El renacimiento de un pueblo: Oda a Cuba* (1902), *Instantáneas* (1907), and *Patrióticas* (1909), and two theatrical works, *La ley marcial* (1885) and *La hija natural* (1886). Most importantly, Escobar's poetry addressed and celebrated his *panameñidad*.

*Patrióticas* (1909) is composed of several poems dedicated to Panama's celebration of independence. The poems "28 de noviembre" and "3 de noviembre," respectively, commemorate Panama's independence from Spain in 1821 and from Colombia in 1903. In 1889, Escobar wrote "28 de noviembre," a highly patriotic poem that recounted Panama's tumultuous history and struggle for independence in seven sections, a poem that would later earn him a first place award from the *Sociedad 'Progreso del Istmo'* (Mendez 12). In the first section of the poem, entitled "Invocación," Escobar calls upon the goddess of memory to allow him to recreate the history of Panama. He writes:

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writer and a member of the same literary generation as José Dolores Urriola, García classifies him as a transitional writer between romanticism and *modernismo*, and Martínez Ortega considers him to be a member of the second generation of *modernista* writers due to his birth and the publication of his works (*Cien años* 348; *Medio siglo* 14; *Las generaciones* 21).

.....

Ven; diosa, ven, refresca mi memoria  
 con tu suave aliento,  
 y conduce a regiones ignoradas  
 mi torpe y extraviado pensamiento,  
 Musa de la Memoria, ven y ayuda  
 en este augusto instante mi cerebro,  
 para elevar a Panamá un requiebro  
 acompañado de armoniosas notas,  
 aunque después mi lira queda muda,  
 rotas sus cuerdas, de entusiasmo rotas...(11)

"28 de noviembre" is a dialogue between the poet and his *patria* in which he desires to recreate its glory. The poet relates the inability to communicate with the image of the "lira rota," a common symbol that expresses linguistic failure in romantic poetry as well as the vulnerability of the poet in relation to his creation (Rivera-Rodas 66). For this reason, Escobar calls upon the goddess of memory to assist him.

In the first section, Escobar recalls the years of rule and domination by Spain. The verse, "tres centurias gemiste bajo el yugo de la opresión libera," evokes his country's years of suffering during the colonial period (11). In this same section, the poet personifies nature to evoke his country's euphoria. He writes:

....El astro hermoso  
 lució con más donaire en el Oriente:  
 brilló más pura la argentada fuente,

y las tempranas flores,  
 ostentaron más bellos sus colores,  
 y perfumaron el Istmeño ambiente.  
 ¡Libertad! murmuraron nuestras aves  
 y a ese nombre los bosques respondieron  
 con acentos melódicos, suaves  
 que las brisas también repercutieron. (12)

The description of nature here is not a mere imitation, but rather symbolizes the poet's elation over his country's independence which he expresses with the exclamation "libertad," repeated throughout the poem. "28 de noviembre" is filled with the hyperbole that is characteristic of the romantic movement. Throughout the poem he exalts his country by repeating "patria" (ten times) and the exclamations "¡28 de noviembre!" and "¡Miradlos, allí están!" which manifests his nationalism.

Like many other romantics of the nineteenth century, Escobar spoke of nationalism and celebrated his country's separation from Spain. Furthermore, Escobar's veneration of Panama demonstrated a burgeoning nationalistic spirit despite the country's political ties to *Gran Colombia*. Escobar's reflection on Panama's liberation from Spain was influenced by the presence of the French on the Isthmus. In 1889, when the poem was written, the French had invaded the Isthmus and had already begun construction of the Canal. Their project would later be taken over by the United States and completed in 1914. Thus, the fifth section of the poem expresses Escobar's fear of the French presence and occupation of the Isthmus. In commemoration of the anniversary of the Isthmus'

independence from Spain, Escobar urges his fellow compatriots to "guardar la integridad de nuestro suelo" (19).

Escobar returns to the theme of national independence in "3 de noviembre," a patriotic poem that expresses joy over Panama's independence from Colombia in 1903. Composed of twenty-two stanzas, "3 de noviembre" establishes the poet's relationship to his homeland. In the first stanza, he reaffirms his *panameñidad*, exclaiming:

Con qué número y metro yo pudiera  
cantarte ¡oh dulce e idolatrada Patria!  
¿en tu fecha solemne? Yo no encuentro  
en este instante el verso delicado  
digno de tí ¡oh tierra de mis padres,  
en donde se meció mi triste cuna! (20)

As in "28 de noviembre," once again Escobar expresses his inability to communicate his patriotism as a poet in the third verse: "Yo no encuentro en este instante el verso delicado digno de tí." Escobar defines Panama as his *patria* because it is "el cielo donde vimos por la primera vez el solar astro," "la tierra idolatrada do corrieron los años de la infancia," and "el dulce arrullo del hogar...do nuestras madres nos dormían con músicas de besos..." (22).

In the remaining stanzas, Escobar traces Panama's eighty-two year struggle for independence from Colombia and defines Panama in terms of its material wealth and its economic prosperity. There is no question that he was influenced by the United States and its focus on utilitarianism which was not just a foreign image to be imitated, but one that was located on Isthmian territory. This focus on modernity as progress in material

terms is exemplified in the verses: "unce al brillante carro del progreso la bella Panamá su gran cuadriga y va sobre aquel carro, magestuosa.../cuanto progreso material/ la Era es de prosperidad indescriptible" (27-28). These verses demonstrate the poet's transition from the romantic movement to the *modernista* movement. Escobar was influenced by United States capitalism and had begun to describe Panama in terms of its material wealth as opposed to its natural resources and other indigenous factors.

Escobar continues to defend his country, and in the final two stanzas he describes Panama as a *crisol de razas* where "todas las razas se dan cita" (28). His description is a utopia where racial harmony and economic prosperity exist for everyone. He describes his country very proudly as a "Cosmópolis" with "gente de diversas razas" (28). By 1906, not only was there a significant number of black West Indians on the Isthmus, but there were also other ethnic groups, although small in number, from China, England, France, Germany, Austria, and India. Escobar recognizes this cultural and ethnic diversity, and idealizes the situation when he proclaims that "no hay pueblo, ni aldea, ni villorio sin escuela en el Istmo" (28). Ismael García notes that during Colombia's rule, education was limited to Panama's elite (*Medio siglo* 15). It is doubtful that just three years after Panama's separation from Colombia, the time when this poem was written, that educational opportunities were accessible in every Panamanian province. Escobar's vision of Panama is subordinated to an idealism that is overshadowed by nationalistic pride for his country's victory over Colombia.

Federico Escobar was not only a national poet, but he also "challenged the social life in Panama with reference to the black skin of the negro" (Barton 194). Escobar was one of the few poets of African ancestry during the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries who openly discussed and embraced his blackness. Escobar's most celebrated poem, "Nieblas" from *Hojas Secas* (1890), expresses self-pride and black awareness. He opens "Nieblas" with an epigraph from "Negro nació," a poem he attributes to the Afro-Colombian poet, Candelario Obeso (1849-1884).<sup>9</sup> Although "Negro nació" was not written by Obeso, the poem expresses an affirmation of blackness and provides Escobar with the inspiration to declare his own Afro-identity.

¡Negro nació! La noche aterradora  
 transmitió su dolor sobre mi cara;  
 pero al teñir mi desgraciado cuerpo  
 dejó una luz en el cristal del alma!  
 (Miró *Cien años* 65)

Escobar responds to the poet's affirmation of blackness by stating:

También negro nació; no es culpa mía.  
 El tinte de la piel no me desdora,  
 pues cuando el alma pura se conserva  
 el color de azabache no deshonra.  
 Hay en el mundo necios que blasonan  
 de nobles por lo blanco de su cara;  
 que ignoran que en la tierra sólo existe  
 una sola nobleza: la del alma.

---

<sup>9</sup> Laurence E. Prescott points out in his poignant study "'Negro nació': Authorship and Verses Attributed to Candelario Obeso" that the poem which for many years was believed to be written by Obeso was authored by the Mexican poet Joaquín Villalobos and that the four verses form part of Villalobos' poem "Amor de negro." Prescott also determined that Villalobos most likely was not of African descent (6,7). However, for the purposes of this study, the poem "Negro nació" will be examined in the context of Escobar's poem "Nieblas," who at the time believed that Obeso was the author.

¿Qué importa que haya seres que se jacten  
 de nobles porque tienen noble sangre  
 si practican el vicio?...Nada importa;  
 que ellos son nada ante el Eterno Padre.  
 ¡Negro nací; pero si Dios Supremo  
 ha teñido mis pieles con la tinta,  
 me ha dado lo que pocos hombres tienen:  
 un corazón virtuoso y una lira.  
 ¡Negro nací, no importa! Mi conciencia  
 me dice que conservo pura el alma,  
 como las puras gotas de rocío,  
 como la blanca espuma de las aguas.  
 Y si la noche con su oscuro manto  
 logró cubrir mi cuerpo aun en la cuna,  
 una luz internó dentro mi pecho  
 y en mi mente una chispa que fulgura.

(Miró *Cien años* 65)

Although critics such as Richard Jackson identified Escobar as a writer who openly accepted his blackness as opposed to Gaspar Octavio Hernández who was noted for his racial ambiguity, a closer reading of Escobar's poem "Nieblas" shows that he too struggled with his blackness and, more importantly, with society's racism (*Black Writers in Latin* 63). Escobar reveals some contradictions in his affirmation of blackness. It is evident that whenever Escobar makes reference to his race, it is in opposition to his

spirituality. He is superior because he has a “corazón virtuoso y una lira.” In the first stanza he insists: “El tinte de la piel no me desdora/pues cuando el alma pura se conserva el color de azabache no deshonorra.” His “alma pura” is contrasted with “el color de azabache.” In the fifth stanza he continues: “Y si la noche con su oscuro manto logró cubrir mi cuerpo aun en la cuna una luz internó dentro mi pecho.” Finally, he compares his soul to “las puras gotas de rocío” and “la blanca espuma de las aguas.” Escobar's legitimacy stems not from his racial identity, but from his spirituality. His heart, soul, and ability to write poetry will enable him to transcend the racial boundaries of discrimination. Furthermore, Escobar's spirituality is described through images of whiteness: “alma pura,” “luz internó dentro mi pecho,” “las puras gotas de rocío,” and “la blanca espuma de las aguas.” These images of whiteness are contrasted with the darker images that the poet uses to describe himself: “el color de azabache” and “oscuro manto.” Although Escobar begins his self-portrait affirming his negritude as evidenced by the first verse (“también negro nací”), the poet elevates his status as a black man by demonstrating that his spirituality, characterized by white images, is what distinguishes him and has earned him a place in society. Thus, Escobar's poem results in elevating the white aesthetic over the black one.

In the second stanza of “Nieblas,” he insists that only one nobility exists, that of the soul. In the remaining stanzas, he mocks those who feel they are superior because of their *nobleza de sangre*. Escobar retorts that he is superior because of his spirituality (“el alma pura”) and his position as a poet (“una lira”), and perhaps as an intellectual, even though he was a canal worker. Clearly, Escobar's insistence on his spirituality as opposed to his racial characteristics is understood. Realizing that Panamanian society

preferred lightness to darkness and whiteness as opposed to blackness, Escobar espoused the *mestizaje* rhetoric and defended his blackness which was not valued by elevating his spiritual qualities.

Furthermore, in 1890 Panama was still occupied by Colombia. Escobar's choice of the poem which he attributed to Candelario Obeso, a fellow compatriot and black man, reflects Colombia's occupation of Panama, as well as his awareness of Afro-Hispanic writers outside of the Isthmus. Escobar responded to Obeso's affirmation of blackness with "también," meaning that he recognized their shared common African heritage and experience in the New World. Already in the nineteenth century Escobar demonstrated an incipient sense of "diaspora consciousness" which suggests that racial identity already transcended national boundaries. In his seminal essay "Diasporas," James Clifford describes the main features of diaspora as "a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship" (305). In addition, diasporas are dispersed networks of peoples who share common historical experiences of dispossession and displacement (309).

Despite Escobar's ambiguous attitude about his negritude, he stands alone as one of the few Afro-Hispanic poets of this generation to demonstrate racial consciousness. Although a majority of his poetry treats the national question, his highly anthologized poem "Nieblas" tells much about Panamanian race relations and the reception of blacks on the Isthmus. His poem "Nieblas" recognizes his negritude, and his reference to Obeso confirms his consciousness of belonging to a broader black diaspora. Escobar attempted to legitimize himself in a nation that abhorred blackness and desired to invisibilize

anything associated with it. "Nieblas" is not only self-affirmation, but it also reflects a racist nineteenth-century Panamanian society. Moreover, it contrasts dramatically with the poetry of José Dolores Urriola who does not reveal racial awareness in his writings. Consequently, Escobar remains an important figure to study because he is the first writer of African ancestry on the Isthmus to openly discuss and acknowledge his blackness even though he embraces it cautiously.

### ***Panamanian Modernismo***

Romantic writers such as Urriola and Escobar used their poetry to rejoice over Panama's separation from Spain and/or to criticize the contemporary political situation. While the romantic poets often used images of nature to relay their message, the *modernistas* sought a renewed language and utilized exotic images such as *cisnes*, *princesas*, *chinerías*, and *japonerías* in their poetry. As a result, they were often criticized for being escapist since their works purportedly did not reflect the problems of the era.

Panamanian *modernismo* began relatively late in 1893 with Darío Herrera (1870-1914), a well-known *modernista* writer on the Isthmus (García *Medio siglo* 27). Darío Herrera belonged to the first generation of *modernista* writers along with León A. Soto (1874-1902), Adolfo García (1872-1900), and Simón Rivas (1867-1914). Patriotism was not a major theme in the writings of this first generation of *modernista* writers whose poetry corresponds to the initial stage of Spanish American *modernismo* where art focused more on the poet, utilized plastic images, and was less concerned with exterior reality. This trend was also apparent in the poetry of Colombian *modernista*, José Asunción Silva (1865-1896).

In addition, literary production on the Isthmus was relatively low because of the *Guerra de los Mil Días* (1899-1902) when Panama fought to separate from Colombia. The costs of the war hampered literary production. While it remained difficult for romantic writers such as Urriola and Escobar to explore racial consciousness because of the emphasis on nationalism, the *modernista* aesthetic also lended itself to escapist tendencies that permitted writers of African descent to avoid their own racial identity.

***Simón Rivas (1867-1914)***

Simón Rivas, a prominent writer of African descent of this first generation of *modernista* writers, was known as the "Edgar Allan Poe panameño" partly because of his "fantasies which he called nocturnes" (Jackson *Black Writers in Latin* 64). Rivas, a pseudonym for Cristóbal Martínez, was a typographer by profession and published most of his works in the newly founded Panamanian literary journals *El Heraldo del Istmo*, *El Mercurio*, and *El Cosmos*. A *modernista* poet, his work was characterized by images of whiteness and avoided mention of the political problems of the period as well as racial identification. Rivas was an avid reader of Spanish American *modernista* poetry, especially that of Bolivian Jaimes Freyre (1866-1933), author of *Castalia bárbara* (1899). Rivas' poem "Las raras," which will be analyzed here, is sentimental and melancholic in nature and reflects the escapist tendencies that characterized this first generation.

Composed of ten stanzas, "Las raras" was published in 1905 in *El Heraldo del Istmo*. Partially reproduced here, the poem reflects the linguistic renovation that characterized much of *modernista* poetry.

Allá van misteriosas, eternas,  
allá van como rosas de fuego  
que salpican la cauda esplendente  
de divino, sagrado misterio,  
del misterio que ardiente las crea  
con la luz de los últimos cielos.

.....

Viven, castas, del fuego sagrado  
que se extrae del dolor y las lágrimas,  
rumorosas, si sienten el gozo,  
gemidoras si pena las mata,  
con un algo: ¡me muero!  
Con un sueño que dice: ¡mañana!

.....

A su voz las tormentas se alejan,  
a sus pies los zarzales no hieren,  
el erial lo matizan de rosas  
y derriten con fuego la nieve,  
a la nieve del tedio derriten  
con el fuego de amor que no muere.

.....

Ellas son las viriles que tienen  
el poder de la luz: la palabra;

las que encarnan los siglos, los pueblos,  
 las que dan su memoria al mañana;  
 y a la sombra del Dios Galileo,  
 son las únicas, puras y raras.

(Miró *Cien años* 111-112)

“Las raras” are described in the first stanza as “misteriosas,” “eternas” and like “rosas de fuego,” and in the second stanza as “oriflomas que llevan las divisas de amor y del triunfo,” “divinos y férreros escudos,” and “antorchas que alumbran las noches.” This “referential plurality” used to describe “las raras” refers to the phenomenon inherent in *modernista* poetry described by Óscar Rivera-Rodas as “la falibilidad de la poesía,” or when “el lenguaje modernista falla en su intento de aprehender la correspondencia exacta entre el significante y el significado” (291). Rivas’ enumeration results from this phenomenon. Throughout the poem Rivas searches for adequate language to describe “las raras” reflecting his search for a renewed language to describe natural and unnatural phenomenon.

In the third stanza, he utilizes *sinestesia* in describing “las raras.” Transformed by joy or pain, “las raras” can be either “rumorosas” or “gemidoras.” Rivas employs personification to relate the power of “las almas” for they feel joy, sadness, and pain. Their power is so great that in the eighth stanza, “a su voz las tormentas se alejan” and “a sus pies los zarzales no hieren.” It is not evident in the beginning of the poem that “las raras” symbolize “las almas.” It is in the final two stanzas that the reader discovers that “las raras” are “...las almas que en ansias de cielo por la ciencia cansaron los años,” that they possess the power of light and are unique, pure, and rare. Moreover, “las raras”

embody the soul, that is, the spirit and symbolize knowledge, the power of light, and the word. For the poet, light symbolizes knowledge and "la palabra." The connection between "las almas" and light reinforces the connection between spirituality and knowledge. For the poet, spirituality is the highest form of knowledge that one can obtain.

Simón Rivas found his place in the nation by writing *modernista* poetry. To be a national poet, and to be Panamanian, was to emulate the European model. Like Urriola, he was more dedicated to writing poetry that reflected the literary movement of his contemporaries, and thus, he did not make blackness an issue in his work. Consequently, his personal stance on race and ethnicity in nineteenth-century Panama remains unclear, especially in light of Richard Jackson's argument that the absence of blackness or of references to one's negritude is just as important as a vehement affirmation.

### ***The Literary Generation of the New Republic (1903-1920)***

While Rivas' compassion and sentimentalism coincide with the predominant artistic expression of the first generation of *modernista* writers, it is not until the generation of the republic that writers return to the patriotic themes that characterized the romantic movement. These writers of the first generation of the Panamanian republic and last generation of *modernista* writers, such as Ricardo Miró (1883-1940), Enrique Geenzier (1887-1943), and Gaspar Octavio Hernández (1893-1918), idealized Panama's past, praised its colonial buildings, and celebrated Panama's independence from Colombia, which it gained in 1903 (Szok *La última* 104). Their works represented a continental solidarity and pride known as *mundonovismo* that sought an autochthonous

past rooted in the colonial past. The national and patriotic poems by Miró, Geenzier, and Hernández, correspond to this Spanish American movement, which was inspired by the Peruvian José Santos Chocano (1875-1934) at the turn of the twentieth century. However, for these Panamanian poets, a national focus did not signify the absence of impressionism and symbolism that characterized the first stage of Spanish American *modernismo*. These two trends coexisted in this generation as writers sought to restore Panama's forgotten past and position themselves in the new republic of Panama. This last generation of *modernista* poets, or first generation of the new republic, utilized these images to extol their country's separation from Colombia.

The writers played just as much of a political role as a literary one. Writers such as Ricardo Miró won fame for patriotic poems like "Patria" which evoked nostalgia for a glorious past. His poems "A Portobelo" and "Campanas de San Felipe" continued this patriotic theme by paying homage to Panama's ruins and colonial sites. Ismael García describes this generation's patriotic stance as the following: "se exagera la exaltación de lo nacional. Todo lo que tienda a elevar la emoción patriótica obtiene los sufragios nacionales" (*Historia* 56). These writers demonstrated that the *modernistas* were not totally divorced from the political situation of the period. As García notes: "el tema patriótico es el que dentro de esta escala descendiente de afectos, se carga de mayores proyecciones" (*Medio siglo* 39).

**"El cisne negro:" Gaspar Octavio Hernández (1893-1918)**

Gaspar Octavio Hernández, known in Panamanian literary circles as "el cisne negro" for the sensuality and sentimentalism that are transmitted in both his poetry and prose, is perhaps the most widely known Afro-Panamanian poet of this generation, both

inside and outside of the Isthmus. Like Urriola and Escobar, he was committed to the nation-building project. Born Octavio Hernández Solanilla in 1893, he later became known in literary circles as Gaspar Octavio Hernández, taking the name of Gaspar Nuñez de Arce, a nineteenth-century Spanish poet. His published works include two volumes of poetry, *Melodías del pasado* (1915) and *La copa de amatista* (1923), and *Iconografía* (1916), a collection of short stories, prose poems, essays, and national eulogies.

Hernández is best known nationally for "Canto a la bandera" (1916), a patriotic poem that continues to be one of the most anthologized poems in Panama today. Along with "Patria" by the nationally revered poet Ricardo Miró, "Canto" is considered to be Panama's poem of nationality and independence. "Canto a la bandera" confirms Hernández's nationality, that is, his *panameñidad*, in opposition to Yankee imperialism. Although Hernández wrote the majority of his poetry during the height of the *modernista* movement, "Canto a la bandera" possesses romantic characteristics underlining again the coexistence of both romanticism and *modernismo* during the period 1880-1920 in Panamanian verse. Hernández has been classified primarily as a *modernista* writer even though his national and patriotic poetry possess romantic characteristics, not only thematically but also stylistically. Ismael García has commented: "Yo diría mas bien que Hernández es un romántico retrasado, por la variedad métrica, su temática y el tono superlativamente sentimental de sus lamentaciones, que aprovechó los procedimientos modernistas de versificación y estilo" (*Historia* 70). Hernández's poem "Canto a la bandera" is an example of this.

Published in 1916, "Canto" marks the celebration of Panama's independence from Colombia in 1903 and the completion of the North American Canal in 1914. The eight

stanza poem is a celebration of Panama's independence and liberty from Spain, Colombia, and the United States. Hernández uses the *mancebo* to evoke his patriotism. In the epigraph to "Canto," the poet writes: "el mancebo sientóse inquieto entusiasmo: el entusiasmo le hizo poeta y le inspiró este cantar" (Miró *Cien años* 190). The mere presence of the Panamanian flag causes the *mancebo* such disbelief that he describes it in awe. The *mancebo* exclaims:

¡Ved cómo asciende sobre el mar la ensena  
 que refleja en sus vícidos colores  
 el mar y el cielo de la patria istmeña!  
 ¡Mirad!...¡Es la bandera panameña,  
 vistosa cual gentil manto de flores! (190)

The flag and the sea symbolize liberty, independence, and national autonomy. Hernández expresses his exuberance by employing the use of exclamation marks and by setting the scene in the sea. The second stanza provides a vision of a marine celebrating his country's freedom while sailing across the sea with Panama's flag. The ascension of the flag in the first and second stanzas parallels the "canciones de alegría" sung by the marine (190). The flag not only affects the sailor, but also "los hombres duros" and "las mujeres bellas" who in the fifth stanza "se inflaman por las estrellas" (190).

The power of the flag and its stars, which symbolize the country's freedom and independence, is so important and prevalent that it will regenerate admiration for Panama's natural resources: "los naranjos" and "las palmas" (191). In the last stanza the position of the flag shifts from the sailing ship to a spiritual position in the sky. The *mancebo* cries:

¡Bandera de la patria! ¡Sube...sube  
 hasta perderte en el azul. Y luego  
 de flotar en la patria del querube;  
 de flotar junto al velo de la nube,  
 si ves que el Hado ciego  
 en los istmeños puso cobardía,  
 desciende al Istmo convertida en fuego  
 y extingue con febril desasosiego  
 a los que amaron tu esplendor un día!

(Miró *Cien años* 191)

The flag establishes its spiritual position in what the poet calls “el azul.” A common symbol used in *modernista* poetry, “el azul” symbolizes the ideal, the ethereal, the infinite, and the unattainable for the human condition. In addition, it represents the unreal as exemplified in this last stanza. Hernández commands the flag to return converted in fire if the Panamanians lose the faith and courage that have been restored.

While “Canto a la bandera” reflects the joy over Panama’s separation from Colombia, his brief essay “El culto del idioma,” expresses the consequences of the construction of the Panama Canal which gave the country its independence. Specifically, in “El culto del idioma,” published in *Iconografía*, Hernández expresses his disdain for black West Indians who refuse to learn and/or speak Spanish. Hernández seems angered not only by the United States presence, but also by the presence of foreign workers who entered and remained in Panama as a result of the construction of the Trans-isthmian Railroad and the French and North American Canals. What disturbs Hernández most is

that many of these foreigners, who are now permanent citizens, refuse to speak Spanish. He criticizes them for trying to be North American instead of Panamanian. Hernández vents:

No escasean quienes suspiran por la cadena del siervo y abundan los que gozan del mayor de los goces cuando les toca ser adulones de hombres o de pueblos forman en estas filas algunos suramericanos, y no pocos antillanos de procedencia hispana, que se pirran por norteamericanizarse y, en su afán de adular al pueblo de Roosevelt, prescinden descaradamente de su lengua madre y se ufanan de expresarse a menudo en incomprensible y tosco *patois* anglo-yankee. (112)

Hernández demonstrates that the anti-West Indian sentiment began upon the arrival of Afro-Antilleans to the Isthmus. Because many West Indians still communicated in their native languages, many Panamanians viewed them as a threat to the Catholic, *mestizo*, Spanish-speaking nation, and, therefore, West Indians were perceived as allies of North America.

Hernández was an integrationist and obviously internalized the all-inclusive ideology of *mestizaje* believing that black West Indians and other immigrants should renounce their native cultural and linguistic affiliations for those of their new homeland. In other words, they were to speak Spanish, convert to Catholicism, and intermarry. For Hernández and many other Panamanians, West Indian and, by extension, blackness signified "foreigner," as the group was identified with North Americans due to their language and perceived economic advantages. In Hernández's essay, we begin to see the seeds of racial tensions among Panamanian blacks, that is, between the Afro-Hispanics and the Afro-West Indians. Thus, Hernández's essay anticipates the anti-imperialistic

and anti-West Indian literature that forms the basis of the social protest literature of the 1930s and 1940s in Panama which will be examined in the third chapter of this dissertation.

The anti-yankee sentiment was not unique to Panama. During the early twentieth century, *modernista* writers throughout Latin America demonstrated their anxiety concerning the influence of United States imperialism and utilitarianism as exemplified by Rodó in *Ariel* (1900) and Darío in “A Roosevelt” (1904). Both *Ariel* and “A Roosevelt” presented Spanish America as having spiritual strength in opposition to the utilitarianism of the United States. These are two examples of many *modernista* works that welcomed modernization but criticized United States materialism that often accompanied it (Lindstrom 14-15).

While “Canto a la bandera” and “El culto del idioma” treat national concerns, a number of Hernández’s writings are melancholic and reflect a troubled childhood. His poems are melancholic in nature and reflect an upbringing and a young adult life of suffering which ended at the early age of twenty-five. Growing up poor, his mother died when he was eight years old, and his two brothers, Dimas and Adolfo, within a month of each other, committed suicide when he was twenty-one. Hernández was a sensitive child and was chided by many of his peers for his interest in the arts. His private suffering contributed to the melancholic tone of much of his work. The themes of death and melancholy are not only a reflection of his troubled childhood, but also foreshadow his premature death from tuberculosis.

Hernández's poem "Melodías del pasado," from the volume of poetry by the same title, expresses his childhood of suffering without his mother. "Melodías" is a longing for

the distant memories of the past that the poet can attain only through the recollection of his mother's lyrical voice. Throughout the eight stanza poem he repeats the phrase, "inolvidable canto materno," a song that he longed for after his mother's death. In the second stanza, he laments:

De mi niñez amarga recuerdo, apenas,  
 que fue meditabundo como un anciano;  
 que sentí emponzoñarse todas mis venas,  
 precozmente, del virus del tedio humano.

(Webster *En un golpe* 3)

For Hernández, life is characterized by pain and sickness and his total existence is a form of torment. He can only remember the bitterness of his own childhood for his memory is haunted by the tender voice of his mother. He continues:

La voz materna sólo vertió en mi oído  
 una canción de angustia y desencanto;  
 cada trémula nota, cada sonido  
 era como un vibrante nuncio de llanto.

(Webster *En un golpe* 3)

His mother's voice becomes a cry of anguish and disenchantment. He uses images of musical instruments to express his mother's voice by comparing it, for example, to a broken harp. In the fourth stanza, her voice is "lánguido, como acento de un arpa rota que gime en desolada noche de invierno" (3). The comparison of his mother's voice to a broken harp reflects the grief that her absence has left in his heart. A mother's tender

voice becomes for him a reminder of bitterness and anguish of a yearning that he can not recuperate.

***“El escapista:” Panama and Hernández’s Struggle with Blackness***

While "Melodías del pasado" is characterized by sentimentalism and melancholy, the majority of Hernández’s poetry stands out for the well-known *modernista* images of *cisnes*, *golondrinas*, *jazmines*, and *azahares* that are employed to venerate whiteness. Because his poems are filled with images of whiteness, his literature has been viewed as escapist, which also characterizes a major tendency of *modernismo*. These images of whiteness come to fruition in "Visión nupcial" which also appears under the title "Vida nupcial" in *La copa de amatista*. "Visión nupcial" describes a woman adorned in whiteness.

Siempre que hacia la torre de mis penas  
 el dulce vuelo tu recuerdo arranca,  
 te miro toda blanca, toda blanca  
 de azahar, de jazmines, de azucenas.

(Hernández *La copa de amatista* 50)

Again, the images pointed out before of *jazmines*, *azahares*, and *azucenas* evoke the *culto de blancura* inherent in *modernista* poetry and the poet’s overriding preoccupation with white images.

The bride described in "Visión nupcial" is not one of man but of God, which makes her purity everlasting. The poet envisions this virgin, who is an angel of God, as a bride with folded arms who is taunting him.

Vistes la inmaculada vestidura  
 de las que van a desposarse....y tiendes  
 los bracitos en cruz, porque pretendes  
 crucificar en mí tus desventuras.

(Hernández *La copa de amatista* 50)

Finally the virgin bride:

[se va] raudamente....como un vuelo  
 hacia el azul, cual si del tenue velo  
 de virgen novia [se] nacieran alas.

(50)

Reminiscent of his poem “Canto a la bandera,” the sky is identified by the poet as “el azul.” The virgin is finally identified as an angel of God who ascends into heaven towards an infinite, ethereal place (“el azul”). Hernández directly mentions the virgin’s whiteness, purity, and by extension, her beauty; as mentioned earlier, his emphasis on the virgin’s whiteness and common use of white images reinforce the notion that he is the most complex Afro-Hispanic poet of this generation for his racial ambiguity, which often contrasts blackness with whiteness. It is interesting to note that the women in his poems are often described as having *cabello de oro* and *tez de nieve*. With the exception of the poems "Claroscuro" and "Cantares de Castilla de Oro," and the prose poem "Coincidencia," all of the women portrayed in Hernández's works are white. The women in “Claroscuro,” “Cantares,” and “Coincidencia” are described as *morenas*. In "Cantares," he sings praises to a "morenita, morenita de pollera colora," but offers no other description of her physical characteristics (*La copa de amatista* 61). Likewise, in

"Coincidencia," she is "alta y morena, tenía los negros cabellos en cortos bucles trenzados sobre la nuca y rodeados de fino ceñidor blanco" (Hernández *Iconografía* 134).

"Claroscuro" differs from both "Cantares de Castilla de Oro" and "Coincidencia" because it possesses the most complete description of a dark woman in his poetry. "Claroscuro" is a portrait of a dark woman with African features. The title represents the opposition between light and darkness that provide the structural and thematic framework of the poem. Blackness can only exist in relation to whiteness and, therefore, in relation to what it is not. Hernández characterizes the *morena* with this polarized opposition:

Ni albor de mirto, ni matiz de aurora,  
 ni palidez de nardo, ni blancura  
 de cera encontraréis en la hermosura  
 de su faz que a los reyes enamora...  
 (Webster *En un golpe* 41).

The repetition of *ni* that characterizes the portrait of this anonymous woman insists on the absence of whiteness and thus, becomes a negation of identity. Although Hernández begins the description with the woman's absence of whiteness, he ends by elevating her dark features.

Como a la Sulamita encantadora  
 que hizo del Rey de Oriente la ventura,  
 hacen más adorable a su figura  
 sus rizos negros y su tez de mora.  
 Así la presintió mi fantasía...  
 bella hermana del príncipe del día,

hija del sol y de la noche, aduna  
 y en la complejidad de su belleza  
 las pompas de la tarde y la tristeza  
 de un tranquilo y sutil claro de luna. (41)

In the second stanza, the poet recognizes beauty in blackness. In effect, Hernández challenged the literary whiteness of the era by daring to mention the beauty of a woman with African features, exemplified by her “rizos negros” and “tez de mora.” Moreover, she is not only beautiful, but she forms part of the poet’s fantasies. The poet found it difficult to describe her beauty, however, because of the “complejidad de su belleza.” This forces one to question whether the woman's beauty is complex, or if the poet lacks the language to describe a black woman's physical characteristics. Given that the poet uses typical *modernista* images to describe what the *morena* is not, it is evident that language is the problem. Indeed, color was complex during this period because the *morena's* beauty did not conform to the white aesthetic. One must bear in mind that Hernández was speaking to a white audience, and he was forced linguistically to use the *modernista* language of the era. Politically, he also had to demonstrate to his audience that this woman did not possess the features typically associated with whiteness and, by extension beauty. Almost apologetically, he begins to tell this audience that although you will not find the beautiful images of whiteness in this woman, she is still to be adored because she possesses other beautiful characteristics not described until now in Panamanian verse.

Perhaps Hernández's poem "Ego sum" (1915) best reflects his struggle with society’s racism. “Ego sum” is structurally and thematically similar to “Claroescuro.” As

Jackson asserts: "Both of these poems suggest blackness by contrast rather than through direct mention, as if the poet could not bring himself to confront it" (*Black Writers in Latin* 74). In the first stanza, Hernández describes himself first in terms of what he is not:

Ni tez de nácar, ni cabellos de oro  
 veréis ornar de galas mi figura;  
 ni la luz del afir, celeste y pura,  
 veréis que en mis pupilas atesoro.

(Miró *Cien años* 187)

In this verse, Hernández employs the use of “correlative parallelism” which allows the poet to contrast the precious objects of beauty with those of darkness (García *Medio siglo* 59). This is evidenced by the structural parallelism of the first and second verses with the third and fourth verses which prepares the reader for the contrast. In addition, the words “nácar,” “luz del afir,” “celeste” and “pura,” which evoke beauty and purity, contrast dramatically with the next stanza where the poet reluctantly describes who he really is: a black man with African features. Hernández writes:

Con piel tostada de atezado moro;  
 con ojos negros de fatal negrura,  
 del Ancón a la falda verde oscura  
 nací frente al Pacífico sonoro.

(Miró *Cien años* 187)

Hernández describes himself not only as black, but it is a fatal blackness. Hernández establishes the white/black, pure/unpure, and light/dark dichotomy with the contrast between the “tez de nácar /piel tostada,” and “ojos celestiales/ojos negros.” Although he

identifies himself as black in this poem, it is with reluctance and in relation to not being white. The language that Hernández chooses presents problems that the black writer faced during this period. As in “Claroscuro,” he used the language of the *modernista* aesthetic that proved not to be adequate to describe himself or the complexities of his race and ethnicity. Linguistically, he described himself in terms of what he was not. Ironically, in order to affirm his identity, he had to first negate who he really was. Reluctantly, he was forced to use the language of the colonizer and that of the *modernista* aesthetic to reach his audience, to identify himself, and to establish a niche in Panamanian society. He defined himself by appropriating the language of the colonizer since he already knew (as evidenced by the repetition of *ni*) that it was not adequate to describe himself as an Afro-Panamanian.

Therefore, “Ego sum,” which is supposed to be an affirmation of his identity as a black Panamanian, concludes by being a negation of identity. In effect, it demonstrates the poet's internal dilemma and struggle with society's image of beauty. Ironically, “Ego sum” is not an affirmation of his identity or his blackness. His description (white/black) seems to evoke Fanon's assertion that in the collective unconscious of the negro, everything that is opposite of white and is black, remains negative when blackness equates to “ugliness, sin, darkness, and immorality” (192). Clearly, Hernández's poetic sentimentalism and negative self-image stem from his internal suffering as a black man in a white world. Of course, his internal suffering and self-realization is not uncommon. As Lewis Nkosi notes: “Black consciousness really begins with the shock of discovery that one is not only black but is also non-white” (cited in Olliz Boyd 65).

"Ego sum" and "Claroscuro" demonstrate that Hernández is not just employing the typical *modernista* images of the period, but that he is conflicted because of his blackness and society's reaction to it. According to Ismael García, his color was a hindrance to his literary success, which was not fully recognized until after his death (*Historia* 69). However, Hernández found a way to transcend his melancholic existence and his plight as a black man in Panama through verse. He suffered during his childhood because he was not accepted by blacks, and he suffered as a young adult because he did not know how to be both black and a national poet accepted in Panamanian literary circles.

Although Concha Peña, in her biography of Hernández, argues that he was not a social pariah and was accepted by white women and men, this acceptance is questionable (41). Compared to his black literary contemporaries, he was definitely the most widely known, and his works continue to be studied today. However, the Panamanian literary critic Roque Laurenza is quick to point out when discussing the literary generation of the republic, that Ricardo Miró, and not Hernández, is more representative of the literary movement of his era and, thus, Miró is the only "authentic" poet of this generation (114). One might argue that Hernández lacks authenticity according to Laurenza because he is a poet of African ancestry who chose to write about his blackness. It should be remembered that his poem, "Canto a la bandera," and not "Ego sum," is nationally revered.

Hernández's racial ambiguity, escapist tendencies, and self-portrait are related to his nationalistic identity and focus on his *panameñidad*. As Richard Jackson suggests:

The pressures that propelled the poet on the one hand into evasive flights toward whiteness and on the other toward the depths of melancholy, in part because of the futile nature of these flights, are the same pressures that made him opt for a patriotic stance rather than a racial one. He chose the greater glory of a nationalistic identity over a purely ethnic one, certainly over one that was black, considering the low esteem in which blackness was held--even by the poet himself--at that time. (*Black Writers and Latin* 70)

Clearly, Gaspar Octavio Hernández chose to stress his *panameñidad*. However, his emphasis on patriotism and nationalism did not necessarily mean that he chose his country over his race. It is useful here to return to Armando Fortune's definition of *panameñidad*. While Fortune stressed that *panameñidad* was intrinsically linked to Panamanian culture, he also noted that "con panameñidad, en un sentido abstracto del vocablo, entendemos 'de lo panameño,' esto es, su modo de ser, su carácter, su condición diferente, su idiosincrasia, su individuación dentro de lo universal, su índole" (293). This is what Hernández sought in his own work. Through his poetry, he challenged the traditional paradigm of *panameñidad* which excluded ethnicities.

Furthermore, Hernández, who has been perceived as an escapist, was very much aware of the reality of Panamanian society and the population's views on blacks. He was also aware of the negative perception of blacks in Panama. He alluded to this in his homage to the black journalist, Edmundo Botello, when he wrote: "Todavía persiste en algunos pseudos antropólogos la idea de que la raza negra es miserable manada de imbéciles, dignos tan sólo de habitar en sucias viviendas bajo el inclemente sol africano..." (*Obras selectas* 417). In this speech, Hernández's awareness of racial

problems on the Isthmus is evident as well as his own personal struggle with racism.

Therefore, Hernández's apparent ambiguity towards his racial awareness is not a testament to his struggle with his blackness but with society's refusal to allow him to be both black and Panamanian. Hernández challenged the traditional paradigm and Panama's acceptance of the all inclusive ideology of exclusion by emphasizing that he was defined by both his race and nationalism, that is, by his blackness and *panameñidad*.

### ***Conclusions***

Afro-Panamanian writers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries appear to have vacillated between a racialized discourse and a nationalistic one. Black consciousness or black awareness is exemplified in the works of Hernández and Escobar, but not in the works of Rivas or Urriola. Simón Rivas and José Dolores Urriola left few published poems, and there is little biographical information to discern their personal and/or professional feelings about race and ethnicity. The few works that they did leave, however, demonstrate that they were writers committed to the national project and/or the literary movement of the time rather than to a racial project. Their works clearly do not express their negritude, nor do they confirm or deny their blackness.

Of the four poets studied here, Federico Escobar is the most overt in his racial declaration, but as previously analyzed, he too is ambiguous. While both Escobar and Hernández have been principally analyzed as black Panamanian writers who accept and reject their blackness, their discourse converges in that it is more nationalist than racially affiliated. Although it appears that Hernández's self-portrait, "Ego sum," differs dramatically from Escobar's "Nieblas," they both subordinate their blackness to a higher image, that is, to whiteness and spirituality. Furthermore, Escobar, in his poem

"Nieblas," demonstrates racial consciousness, but this is the only place where it is clearly portrayed. The others are dedicated to the project of nation-building. In addition, while past analyses of Hernández's works have viewed him simply as an escapist, further readings illustrate the complexities of color in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Panama where many writers were forced to "write white" to be identified with the national foundation of the Isthmus.

As a result, in this first generation of Afro-Hispanic writers, patriotism and not negritude was a unifying theme and concept. However, there is a literary, political, and intellectual evolution in the discourse of these first writers of African descent beginning with the nationalistic poetry of Urriola and ending with the racially conflicted works of Hernández. Urriola avoids racial identification in his poetry, and although conflicted, Hernández problematizes the duality of being both black and Panamanian in a country that abhors blackness.

Escobar and Hernández should not be remembered as poets who stressed their *panameñidad* over their blackness, but instead as poets who emphasized their nationality from their position as black writers in a *hispanicized* territory. "Nieblas" planted the seed for black awareness, and Hernández problematized this black consciousness by showing the failure of the *modernista* language to adequately describe himself. Furthermore, they each challenged the traditional paradigm by attempting to portray themselves and, by extension, their blackness in a society that desired to be viewed contradictorily as a *mestizo*, non-black nation.

All of these poets published their works between 1890 and 1923 and represented a transition from the romantic movement to the *modernista* one, and from *Gran*

*Colombia's* occupation of Panama to the Isthmus' existence as an independent republic. Whether they were denying their blackness or celebrating their ethnicity, these writers shared a common patriotism and a commitment to the nation-building project. They were the first writers of African descent in Panama to leave behind published works and provide insight into the trials and tribulations of being black and Panamanian during the height of the nationalistic movement.

## Chapter two

### The Black Image in Early Twentieth-Century Panamanian Literature

Panama experienced major demographic changes at the beginning of the twentieth century. After Panama's independence from Colombia in 1903, thousands of West Indians migrated to work on the Panama Canal (1904-1914). The Panamanian oligarchy, who had already expressed concern over Panama's rising black population in the nineteenth century due to its large African indigenous population, felt increasingly vulnerable to the West Indians who migrated to construct the Trans-isthmian Railroad (1850-55) and the French Canal (1888-1903).<sup>10</sup> To add to Panama's xenophobia, the United States took over the French project and occupied the Canal Zone which included the terminal cities of Colón and Panama. Indeed, Panamanians felt threatened by the United States presence; they felt that the United States was trying to impose a North American standard of living on the *hispanicized* territory. With the increasing presence of foreigners, Panama was pressured to defend itself against the non-Hispanic, and therefore, anti-national communities on the Isthmus.

In the early twentieth century, Panama attempted to defend its *panameñidad* which for some was rooted in its indigenous past. Recently emancipated, Panama reinforced its *hispanidad* and distanced itself from North American imperialism that was identified with the Canal Zone. Regionalist literature emerged during the second decade of the twentieth century which emphasized Panama's autochthonous roots. This literary trend, also known as *criollismo*, flourished in Latin American countries during the early twentieth century. The Argentinean Ricardo Güiraldes, for example, contributed to the

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<sup>10</sup> I use the term African indigenous population to identify blacks who came to Panama as slaves.

myth of the *gaucho* as an autochthonous component of the *pampa* in his novel *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926). In the Andean region, particularly in Ecuador and Perú, this literary trend led to the creation of *indigenismo* as writers like Jorge Icaza in *Huasipungo* (1931) and Ciro Alegría in *Los perros hambrientos* (1938) focused on the exploitation of the indigenous populations.

Like these countries, Panama turned to its interior to "discover" its origins. Panamanian literature highlighted its indigenous past as well as its Spanish heritage. This regionalist and anti-imperialistic literature served to restore Panama's indigenous roots while stressing the Isthmus' ties to Spain and distancing it from the cultural and imperial influences of the United States. For example, the Panamanian journalist and poet Moisés Castillo (1899-1974) affirmed Panamanian nationality and warned of the dangers of cosmopolitanism in his works during the second decade of the twentieth century (Saz 32). In *Crisol* (1936), José Isaac Fábrega (1900-1986) described Panama as a *crisol de razas* comprised of a native African, European, and indigenous population as well as immigrants from the United States and the Caribbean. Notwithstanding the title of Fábrega's text, which suggested a *crisol de razas* where various races coexisted harmoniously, he argued that it was precisely this diversity which threatened Panama's autochthonous roots and that Panama's national foundation was rooted in its Spanish heritage.

It is not surprising that Fábrega's novel is set in the interior of Panama on the sugar plantation of San Isidoro and contrasts with the Canal Zone which is filled with foreign immigrants who do not speak Spanish. The main character in the novel, don Santiago Jovellanos, is from Spain and opposes the relationship between his Spanish

daughter Dolores and the North American engineer Frank O'Neil. Don Santiago's Spanish heritage is continuously contrasted to that of the North Americans who have made English a widely spoken language. Angry over the use of English in his store, don Santiago says: "Panamá es de origen español y mi tienda es española...El que quiera venir a comprarme, que compre en nuestro idioma o que se vaya" (Fábrega 84).

Fábrega's text aided in propagating anti-imperialism. Fábrega and other *criollista* writers "contrasted the zone of transit with the serenity of the more *mestizo* interior and posited that Colón and Panama City were less national than the provinces" (Szok *La última* 104).

### ***Poesía Negroide***

While Panama sought to reaffirm its Spanish and European roots, other countries of Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean desired to explore their African heritage. During the first decades of the twentieth century, European scholars became interested in African civilization and culture. The German sociologist Leo Frobenius (1873-1938) studied African civilization and culture, and in 1910 published *The Black Decameron* which "helped to propagate legends, myths and assorted oral literature from the heart of Black Africa" (Wilson "La poesía" 91). During the years that immediately followed the First World War (1914-1918), European intellectuals reacted against the failures of Western civilization and looked to Africa which was untouched and uncorrupted by modernization and Western thought (Coulthard 41). As Watson Miller suggests: "After World War I, all aspects of black culture became of interest to the Europeans and, later, the Americans" (33). European scholars looked to Africa as a source and as an example of a pristine culture untouched by Western European or United States decadence. The

interest in Africa manifested itself in all artistic realms including art, literature, history, and psychology (Coulthard 41).

This movement eventually spread to Latin America and the Caribbean where white intellectuals became interested in portraying Afro-Latin America. The literary subject was no longer Euro-centered, but rather had its roots in Africa. In Latin America, this movement manifested itself in poetry and was known as *poesía negroide* or poetic negrism. *Poesía negroide* emerged in the second decade of the twentieth century and is considered a part of the Avant-garde movement (Videla de Rivera 200). *Poesía negroide* was a pseudo-black poetry that focused on physical elements of the black, his/her sexual prowess and propensity toward music (Cartey 67). These poets used poetic devices such as onomatopoeia, repetition, rhythm, and rhyme to portray African culture. Although this poetry was concerned with the black image, it was primarily a movement of white intellectuals who portrayed blacks as objects. As a result, the movement has often been viewed as the "exploitation of black culture by white writers" (41).

The major exponents of *poesía negroide* were found in the Spanish Caribbean, particularly in Puerto Rico and Cuba. Puerto Rico's Luis Palés Matos (1898-1957) and Cuba's Emilio Ballagas (1910-1954) are two writers who portrayed blacks and African culture as sensual, exotic, and sexual without any psychological profundity. These writers failed "to provide a realistic image of the black man in Cuba and the Caribbean" (Watson Miller 34). Therefore, while white intellectuals made efforts to depict blacks and black culture in their works, the black literary image that emerged during this period was often superficial, and rarely focused on the socio-historical and socio-economic factors that plagued black America such as poverty, discrimination, and racism.

Moreover, black characters were never depicted as being able to think or to create ideas. Consequently, *poesía negroide* was primarily superficial and ahistorical, and did not present the effects of slavery or the arrival of blacks to the New World. Instead, blacks were simply musical figures derived from the white imagination.

This interest in black culture also spread to the United States where black artists became part of what is known as the Harlem Renaissance. However, unlike the movement in Latin America, this was a movement of black artists and intellectuals such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen who promoted African heritage and racial pride.

Despite Panama's large African population, *poesía negroide* did not flourish in this country as it had in the Caribbean nations of Cuba and Puerto Rico; nor did it experience a movement similar to that in the United States. The lack of major Panamanian writers of poetic negrism was due perhaps to Panama's geographical remoteness from these Caribbean islands as opposed to the rest of Latin America and, also, because of Panama's late independence in 1903. As Matilde Elena López notes: "La poesía negra de Panamá no ha tenido grandes exponentes como en otras latitudes. Las Antologías de poesía negra americana incluyen excepcionalmente a Demetrio Korsi que explotó con acierto el filón de riquísimas vetas de la lírica afroespañola" (cited in Franceschi *Carbones* 11). In addition, like the Dominican Republic, Panama sought to emphasize its Spanish heritage and wanted to ignore its African heritage.<sup>11</sup> Similar to the Dominican Republic which attempted to divorce itself culturally from Haiti and, by extension, from blackness, Panama also rejected any meaningful identification with its

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<sup>11</sup> Although *poesía negroide* flourished more in the Dominican Republic than in Panama with writers such as Manuel del Cabral (1907), Rubén Suro (1916), and Tomás Hernández Franco (1904-1952), intellectuals attempted to ignore the African heritage (Stinchcomb 59).

large African indigenous and Afro-Antillean populations. Consequently, while other countries such as Cuba and Puerto Rico desired to “discover” their African indigenous heritage, Panama wanted to disassociate itself from anything that was not European. In effect, Panama ignored its black heritage and subsequently escaped to the interior of the country as previously illustrated in *Crisol*.

Although many writers such as Fábrega focused on Panama's rural interior, a few Panamanian writers such as Víctor M. Franceschi (1931-1984), Demetrio Korsi (1899-1957), and Rogelio Sinán (1904-1994) made an effort to depict blacks in their works during the early twentieth century. However, despite the efforts of these writers to portray blacks in their works, many of them such as Franceschi did not surpass a flawed essentialism. In addition, their works demonstrate the changing representation of the black in Panamanian literature which I divide into four categories: descriptive exoticism, social protest, anti-imperialism, and the emergence of the new Panamanian, the West Indian.<sup>12</sup>

In the works that I characterize as descriptive exoticism, the black figure is superficially portrayed as an exotic figure who sings and dances. In addition, the exoticism of the *mulata* is overemphasized and she is portrayed as a forbidden fruit that results from the poet's own desires. Although Víctor M. Franceschi (1931-1984) chronologically writes much later than Demetrio Korsi, his poetry will be analyzed first because it is an example of the first category, descriptive exoticism, and best demonstrates the evolution of the literary image of the black in Panamanian literature.

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<sup>12</sup> “Descriptive exoticism” is a term coined by the German scholar Janheinz Jahn in his work *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*. New York: Grove Press, 1961. The fourth category, the emergence of the new Panamanian, the West Indian, is not evidenced in this chapter but will be further explored in chapter three.

***Víctor M. Franceschi***

Born in the province of Chiriquí which is located in the interior of Panama, Víctor M. Franceschi (1931-1984) wanted to be a poet of Afro-Panama, but failed. Franceschi wrote much later than other *negrista* writers and published his collection of negroide poetry, entitled *Carbones*, in 1956. This is Franceschi's only collection of published negroide poetry, and is one of three published volumes of poetry which include *Epístola sideral* (1959) and *Apocalipsis* (1975). The title of the collection, *Carbones*, comes from a quotation by the Dominican *negrista* poet Manuel del Cabral (1907) that Franceschi includes in the preface: "Y como si sacaras a pedazos tu cuerpo de la tierra, te vi sacar *carbones* de la tierra" (23; emphasis mine). Franceschi's anthology begins with a pictorial caricature of a dancing black woman with uncharacteristically large lips and illustrates the extent to which his work exemplifies descriptive exoticism. In his depictions, blacks spend the day dancing which conveniently frees them from any worries of discrimination or oppression.

His poem "Zamba, Kilombo y Zamba, é" (1955) is an example of descriptive exoticism and presents the "zamba," a woman of Indian and African ancestry.

Zamba, Kilombo y Zamba, é..

Zamba, Kilombo y Zamba, á...

Zamba, Kilombo y Zamba, ó...

¡Ese es tu sueño!

Suena tu negro zambo,

zambo que está bailando

tumba tá repicando,

¡tu negro zambo!  
 Dice que tá cantando  
 canto para Tomasa  
 baila que baila en casa,  
 ¡la negra zamba!

.....

Fuma tu habano, fuma...  
 Sorbe tu whisky, sorbe...  
 Negro te está esperando,  
 Sigue soñando,  
 ¡Zamba, Kilombo y Zamba, é...!

(Franceschi *Carbones* 39)

The repetition of the refrain "Zamba, Kilombo y Zamba, é," emphasizes the dance motif that runs throughout the poem. The actions of the blacks are limited to dancing, singing, smoking, and drinking. Franceschi attempts to establish African rhythms by ending the verses with *é*, *á*, *ó*. He imitates other tropes of negroide poetry by using the apocopation of "tá" in the seventh verse, a common aspect of negroide poetry. Yet, the poem lacks authenticity in its inability to portray accurately Afro-Panamanian culture. Franceschi is unable to surpass a superficial aestheticism when characterizing the *zamba* because he is not familiar with blacks or black culture on the Isthmus; he does not know the black *por dentro* or from the inside.

A similar characterization of the black Panamanian woman can be seen in "Ritmo que mueve y mata," where the *mulata* appears as an exotic, dancing, sexual figure.

Clave, tumba y maracas.  
 Tumba, clave y bongó.  
 Ritmo que mueve y mata,  
 rumba que ya empezó...  
 Síqui-sisíqui-síqui  
 síqui-sisíqui-sás  
 van diciendo las maracas,  
 riendo, riendo en su compás...  
 Mueve tus senos, mulata,  
 Dále a tu cuerpo el son.  
 Quema tu sangre en ron:  
 quema tu esclavitud...  
 .....

(Franceschi *Carbones* 36)

The *mulata* emerges again as a sexual figure who gyrates to the musical sounds of the “maracas” and the “bongo,” the African drum, as evidenced in the verses “Mueve tus senos, mulata/Dale a tu cuerpo el son.” Franceschi objectifies the *mulata*; instead of a subject, he sees her only as an object of his own personal desires. The repetition of the refrain, “Síqui,-sisíqui-síqui/Síqui-sisíqui-sás,” is an example of *jitanjáforas* or nonsense words that evoke a carnivalesque atmosphere. *Jitanjáforas* are “words created by the poet to set the tone or musicality of the poem” (Watson Miller 36). Although Franceschi refers to slavery in the verse, “quema tu esclavitud,” any notion of oppression and its significance is lost to the *mulata*’s gyrating hips.

Franceschi's description of the *mulata* is an example of the works of white intellectuals who "were more interested in the black as a child of nature, and as a result, depicted him [or her] as an amoral primitive, full of song, dance, unusual rhythm, and sensuality" (Jackson *The Black Image* 43). Franceschi was highly criticized for his inability as a white intellectual to write negroide poetry, and for his poems' lack of authenticity. He responded to these accusations in his essay, "El hombre blanco en la poesía negra," by emphasizing that white writers can accurately depict blacks in their works. He argued: "Es mi único interés, demostrar que no hay verdad en la aseveración de que el hombre blanco no puede escribir poesía negra, so pena de que cae en afectación y en insinceridad" (138). Despite his argument, Franceschi's poetry comes off as being insincere; it fails to capture the complexities of the black Panamanian due to its one-dimensional portrayal of blacks who supposedly only contributed music to the Isthmus.

Although Franceschi makes a distinction between the Afro-Hispanic and the Afro-Antillean according to their cultural and national affiliations to Panama, he is only concerned with representing the Afro-Hispanic population. He notes:

Refiérome especialmente al negro venido cuando la construcción del Canal de Panamá, porque ése es el que habita las ciudades terminales y es el que más acentuados rasgos africanos muestra. El negro de la colonia yace más asimilado a nuestra nacionalidad, son más criollos y por lo tanto difieren bastante. ("El hombre" 135)

Franceschi's assertion reinforces the myth that colonial blacks assimilated into Panamanian culture and that West Indians did not. He seems to be concerned only with rescuing the African past and not with characterizing West Indians. These distinctions

and representations of blacks in Panamanian literature will affect the reaction of contemporary Panamanian West Indian writers who seek to redeem these myths and negative portrayals in their works.

Ironically, while Franceschi distinguishes Afro-Hispanics from Afro-West Indians in his essay, his poems do not differentiate the two groups. In fact, in his poetry blacks are black; whether they are of colonial descent or Caribbean ancestry is not of importance to Franceschi. He characterizes them as exotic, and for this reason his poetry does not surpass the first category of descriptive exoticism. As a result, his racist comments about Afro-Antilleans as evidenced in the above-cited essay, and his essentialist descriptions of blacks in his poetry illustrate his racism towards all blacks in Panama during this period.

### ***Demetrio Korsi***

Demetrio Korsi (1899-1957) is considered to be a writer of the first generation of the Avant-garde movement in Panama (Martínez-Ortega *Diccionario* 48). Born in the *barrio* of Santa Ana in Panama City to a Greek father and a Panamanian mother, Korsi is the “self-styled poet of Afro-Panama” (Szok *La última* 105). Demetrio Korsi was no stranger to blackness or to black Panamanian culture. He and the Afro-Hispanic poet Gaspar Octavio Hernández, studied in the previous chapter, were good friends which compelled Korsi to eulogize him after his premature death in 1916. Therefore, Korsi’s interest in portraying black culture and black people in his works is no surprise.

While Korsi's poetic repertoire is extensive, including several volumes of poetry and novels published during his lifetime, the majority of his negroide poetry comes from

the collection of poems entitled, *Los gringos llegan y la cumbia se va* (1953).<sup>13</sup> Although *Los gringos* was not published until 1953, many of the poems were written in the twenties and thirties and appeared first in the volumes of poetry *Cumbia* (1935) and *Cumbia y otros poemas panameñistas* (1941).

The title *Los gringos llegan y la cumbia se va* reflects the anti-imperialistic tone of the entire collection. *Los gringos* combines the three pillars of Panamanian nationality: folklore, race, and the Canal, symbolized by the *cumbia*, the *chombo*, and the *gringo* (Jaen E. 31). The *gringo* and *chombo* are both by-products of the canal and are viewed in opposition to the interior and to Panama's autochthonous past which is symbolized by the *cumbia*. Korsi's poetry possesses aspects of descriptive exoticism, social protest, and anti-imperialism. While some of his poetry possesses exotic descriptions of the *mulata*, he also protests discrimination against blacks and denounces racial inequality and United States imperialism.

Many of Korsi's poems depict women as exotic creatures that serve to satisfy the male sexual appetite. This stereotypical portrayal of black women dates back to their portrayal in Peninsular literature where black women were almost always characterized as inferior to white women and the embodiment of the sexual (Young 138). In "Zamba chamera" (1932), an example of descriptive exoticism, the *zamba* of Indian and African ancestry is portrayed as an exotic, sexual being, and as a kind of forbidden fruit.

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<sup>13</sup> Demetrio Korsi's published volumes include: *Los poemas extraños*,(1920), *Leyenda bárbara* (1921), *Tierras vírgenes* (1923), *Los pájaros de la montaña* (1924), *Bajo el sol de California* (1924), *El viento en la montaña* (1926), *Antología de Panamá* (1926), *El amor fuerza universal* (1926), *El palacio del sol* (1927), *Block* (1934), *Escenas de la vida tropical* (1934), *El Dr. Llorent* (1935), *Cumbia* (1935), *El grillo que cantó sobre el Canal* (1937), *Cumbia y otros poemas panameñistas* (1941), *El grillo que cantó bajo las hélices* (1942), *Yo cantaba a la falda del Ancón* (1943), *Pequeña Antología* (1947), *Canciones efímeras* (1950), *Nocturno en gris* (1952), *Los gringos llegan y la cumbia se va* (1953), *El tiempo se perdía y todo era lo mismo* (1956).

Zamba chamera,  
 por tí el milagro de que yo quiera  
 dos ojos, negros como el carbón;  
 por tí, se enciende mi cara mate  
 cuando tus brazos de chocolate  
 me aprietan contra tu corazón.  
 Eres un goce nunca gozado,  
 una caricia desconocida,  
 y así ha sabido mi errante vida  
 del exotismo de tu pecado  
 en una noche de frenesí.

.....

(Korsi *Los gringos* 18)

In the first stanza, the *zamba* stands out for her blackness which is emphasized with the dark metaphors of “carbón” and “chocolate” that depict her eyes and arms. She emerges as an exotic figure unknown to the poet as evidenced in the first verse of the second stanza: "Eres un goce nunca gozado," and "una caricia desconocida." The poet only knows the *zamba* through his dreams when he fantasizes about her. In addition, her pleasure is only to be enjoyed at night, “en una noche de frenesí.” Clearly, for Korsi, the *zamba* represents the biological, the physical, and the sexual, and serves as an object of his fantasies.

While "Zamba" is characterized principally by an exotic woman, "Incidente de cumbia" comes closest to surpassing a flawed essentialism. "Incidente de cumbia"

(1929), published in *Los gringos llegan y la cumbia se va* (1953), alludes to the friction caused by the North American presence, and it exalts Panamanian nationality through its folklore (Martínez O. "La identidad" 143). This poem possesses elements of all three categories of Afro-Panamanian literature. It begins:

Con queja de indio y grito de chombo,  
dentro la cantina de Pancha Manchá,  
trazumando ambiente de timba y kilombo,  
se oye que la cumbia resonando está...

Baile que legara la abuela africana  
de cadena chata y pelo cuscú,  
.....

Pancha Manchá tiene la cumbia caliente,  
la de Chepigana y la del Chocó,  
.....

Chimbombó es el negro que Meme embrujara,  
.....

Meme, baila...El negro, como un animal,  
llora los desprecios que le hace la negra

¡y es que quiere a un gringo la zamba fatal!

Como un clavo dicen que saca otro clavo,  
aporrea el cuero que su mano hinchó;

mientras más borracho su golpe es más bravo;  
-----

Del puñal armado los persigue, y ambos  
 mueren del acero del gran Chimbombó;  
 y la turbamulta de negros y zambos,  
 sienten que, a la Raza, Chimbombó vengó...

.....

(Korsi *Los gringos* 13-14)

"Incidente de cumbia" takes place in Pancha Manchá's tavern and tells the story of black Chimbombó who stabs both his girlfriend Meme and the North American after she tries to run off with him. The action takes place to the background music of the *cumbia*. The music intensifies along with the action of the poem which builds up to Chimbombó's stabbing of both Meme and the *gringo*. The association of the *cumbia* with blacks and, more importantly, with Chimbombó is evident in the first verse of the second stanza, "baile que legara la abuela africana."

Chimbombó appears as a figure bewitched by Meme ("el negro que Meme embrujara") and is motivated by his animal instincts to dance and kill. Chimbombó "tiene mala juma y alma de león," and "llora los desprecios que le hace la negra." In the eighth stanza, Chimbombó kills both Meme and the *gringo* to avenge both his reputation and the black race. Notwithstanding Korsi's attempts to portray black culture on the Isthmus, Chimbombó is described as someone promulgated by his animal instincts and, by extension, his lack of civility to kill and avenge his reputation and race. Meme is described first as a "zamba fatal" and then as an "ardiente mulata," whose sexual powers have "possessed" Chimbombó to kill the *gringo* who is depicted as the enemy, all of which reveals the anti-imperialistic tone of the period. Despite his lack of civility,

Chimbombó ends as the hero of “Incidente de cumbia,” and by the ninth and tenth stanzas has already been transformed into a legend.

“Incidente de cumbia” combines folklore from the interior exemplified by the reference to Chepigana and Chocó, with that of the urban areas of Colón and Panama. It incorporates popular speech which reflects both the urban and the rural Panamanian provinces, as reflected in the expressions “fuerte y bochinchosa,” “de cadena chata y pelo cuscú,” “Pancha Manchá tiene la cumbia caliente,” “como un clavo dicen que saca otro clavo,” and “turbamulta de negros y zambos” (Martínez O. “La identidad” 143). *El tambor, la cumbia*, and *el tamborito* are all typical dances of Panama that originated in Colombia (Fortune 398). In addition, the *cumbia* is a form of music and dance in 4/4 meter from the Atlantic coast of Colombia that is identified with its African heritage. These references to the urban and the rural contrast with some of Korsi’s contemporaries, like José Isaac Fábrega, who posit that the essence of the Panamanian nation lies solely in the interior and in its indigenous past. Korsi recognizes the importance of all these ethnic factors. However, despite Korsi’s depictions of urban and rural Panama, blacks in his poetry, as in that of Franceschi’s, are overwhelmingly stereotypical and essentialist.

The poems written in the 1940s by Korsi demonstrate the changing ethnic composition of the Panamanian nation due to United States imperialism. In “Una visión de Panamá,” (1943) also from *Los gringos llegan y la cumbia se va* (1953), Korsi portrays Panama as a city of *negros* and *gringos*. It represents the second and third categories, anti-imperialism and social protest. The arrival of the *gringos*, i.e., the North Americans, signifies the loss of Panama’s Spanish roots:

Gringos, gringos, gringos...Negros, negros, negros...

Tiendas y almacenes, cien razas al sol.

Cholitas cuadradas y zafias mulatas

lleen los zaguanes de prostitución.

Un coche decrepito pasa con turistas.

Soldados, marinos, que vienen y van,

y, empantalonadas, las cabaretistas

que aquí han descubierto la tierra de Adán.

Panamá la fácil, Panamá la abierta,

Panamá la de esa Avenida Central

que es encrucijada, puente, puerto y puerta

por donde debiera entrarse al Canal.

.....

Gringos, negros, negros, gringos...¡Panamá!

(*Los gringos* 37)

The repetition of *gringos* and *negros* in the first and last verses brings to light the new ethnic composition that characterizes Panama of the 1940s. The juxtaposition of blacks and *gringos* reinforces the connection between blacks and “foreigner” in the last verse: “Gringos, negros, negros, gringos...Panamá!” Panama is primarily foreign and non-Hispanic and is not the *mestizo* nation that intellectuals once tried to promote in the latter part of the nineteenth century; it is a country of *negros* and *gringos*. Korsi does not identify blacks as Afro-Hispanic or as Afro-Antillean; what disturbs him the most is the

multitude and the fact that foreigners and blacks outnumber the *mestizo* population in Panama.

In addition, Panama has been transformed into a brothel ("los zaguanes de prostitución") created by the "soldados, marinos, que vienen y van." The verses, "Panamá la fácil, Panamá la abierta," refer to the North American exploitation of the country and Panama's lack of autonomy despite its independence. Panama is no longer a country of the *cumbia*, and it has been culturally transformed by the effects of imperialism and the subsequent exploitation of its geographic position. As Heliadora Jaen notes: "En este poema [Una visión de Panamá] Korsi asevera el bajo nivel del capitalismo, donde se capta públicamente todo género de torpeza y sensualismo y, en consecuencia, el problema evidente de la prostitución y corrupción" (78).

Not all of Korsi's social protest poems are anti-imperialistic. "Dos niños juegan en el parque" (1949) is a poem of social protest that denounces racial inequality.

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Al parque llega un niño, blanco y rubio. Lo cuida  
una sirvienta: es hijo talvez de un gamonal.  
Parece endomingado con su ropa aplanchada.  
Y es tan frágil su aspecto que parece una flor  
y es tan fina su voz que parece un cristal.  
Después, llega un negrito del pueblo y se le acerca.  
Y la sirvienta grítale: ---¡Huye, que tú estás fó!  
El negrito del pueblo es limpiabotas,  
y saca su bolero

y lo juega, sentado en su cajón.  
 El “niño-bien” lo mira y le sonr e,  
 y haciendo su capricho va a ponerse a su lado.  
 Al blanco y al negrito lo mismo les da el sol.  
 El chico de la calle le presta su bolero  
 al otro, blanco y rubio, como una suave flor.  
 Y all  no hay diferencias sociales:  solamente  
 hay dos ni os que juegan, sin mirarse el color!  
 (Korsi *Los gringos* 47)

“Dos ni os” takes place in Korsi’s native Santa Ana and tells the story of two children, one black, one white, one poor, one rich, who play together despite their racial and social distinctions. “Dos ni os” resembles the Afro-Cuban Nicol s Guill n’s poem, “Dos ni os,” from *S ngoro Cosongo* (1931) and seeks to give a vision of harmony where racial and social divisions do not exist. Korsi notes in the last two verses that during child’s play social divisions do not exist because of the innocence of childhood. Thus, blacks and whites are equal because “Al blanco y al negrito lo mismo les da el sol.” Here, the innocence of childhood impedes racial distinctions.

Korsi’s concern with black/white unity is diminished when one reads his views on West Indians which supported the racist discourse of the period. Ironically, while Korsi’s poetry is anti-gringo, pro-African folklore, and pro-Panamanian, he addresses his own preoccupations with the dominant presence of West Indians when “advocating the expulsion of sixty or seventy thousand West Indians that infest our cities...” (Szok *La  ltima* 47). Such contradictory attitudes towards race are not uncommon in Latin

America (Jackson *The Black Image* 134). While Korsi recognized the importance of race and celebrated racial diversity on the Isthmus, he could not free himself of his internal fears of another race taking over. It is evident, then, that Korsi was merely interested in blacks and black culture on a superficial anthropological level. As a Panamanian, he felt threatened by blacks and believed that they would alter the national foundation of the Isthmus.

### ***Rogelio Sinán and Socio-negristic Prose***

Rogelio Sinán (1904-1994), pseudonym for Bernardo Domínguez Alba, is the most prolific essayist, novelist, dramatist, poet, and short story writer on the Isthmus. Credited with initiating the Avant-garde movement in Panama in both poetry and prose, as exemplified by his collection of poems *Onda* (1929) and his short story "El sueño de Serafín" (1931), Sinán is another Panamanian writer who attempted to portray blacks in his works.<sup>14</sup> It is in his prose and not his poetry, however, where Sinán utilizes the black image to protest racial discrimination. The prose of Rogelio Sinán (1904-1994) belongs to the second category of Afro-Panamanian literature, the social protest literature with some remnants of descriptive exoticism. His short stories protest racial discrimination and are examples of socio-negristic literature. As Richard Jackson notes: "Socio-negristic prose dealt with the social problems of the black in his struggle against prejudice and social degradation" (*The Black Image* 132). Although there remain sexual

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<sup>14</sup> Sinán's published works include: *Onda* (1929), *La Cucarachita Mandinga, farsa infantil* (1937), *Incendio* (1944), *Todo un conflicto de sangre* (1946), *A la orilla de las estatuas maduras* (1946), *Plenilunio* (1947), *Dos aventuras en el lejano oriente* (1947), *Semana Santa en la niebla* (1949), *La boina roja* (1954), *Los pájaros del sueño* (1957), *Rutas de la novela panameña* (1957), *Chiquilinga* (1961), *Cuna común* (1963), *Saloma sin salomar* (1969), *Cuentos de Rogelio Sinán* (1971), *Lobo go home* (1976), and *La isla mágica* (1977).

stereotypes and sexual myths about blacks in his prose that evoke descriptive exoticism, unlike Franceschi, Sinán exposes racial discrimination. His work surpasses that of Franceschi and Korsi because “very little protest against prejudice and racial discrimination come from the white practitioners of poetic negrism” (42).

Although these short stories are not *vanguardista* texts, published in the 1940s and 1950s, they were highly impacted by surrealism, which inspired many *vanguardista* writers such as Sinán during the early twentieth century. Surrealism was a “movimiento cultural que pretende una comprensión y expresión total del hombre y del mundo, utilizando todos los medios del conocimiento, especialmente ‘aquellos ajenos a la razón: sensación, intuición, examen de lo onírico, experiencia sexual, [y] la exploración del azar’” (Videla de Rivero 63). In the stories analyzed, Sinán incorporates dreams, an integral part of surrealism, to expose the racial fears and prejudices of his main characters. The short stories, "Todo un conflicto de sangre" (1946), "La boina roja," (1953) and the novel *Plenilunio* (1947), protest racial discrimination, but still possess essentialist black characters. Sinán protests racial discrimination by exposing the racial fears and attitudes that non-Panamanians have towards blacks. In addition, his short stories are cosmopolitan and international, often depicting foreigners and not just Panamanians.

In "Todo un conflicto de sangre," Sinán utilizes dreams to expose the racial conflict of the main character, Mrs. Rosenberg, a German Jew who suffers from an accident and believes that she is becoming black after a blood transfusion. After the transfusion, she learns from her psychiatrist that the blood transfusion was given to her by her black West Indian chauffer, Joe Ward. Subsequently, she has four dreams that

involve black people. In the first dream, the Christ of Gólgota is black (135). In the second dream, Mrs. Rosenberg goes to a church where she hears blacks singing and sees them dancing (137). The third dream takes place in a fashion store where she sells African memorabilia, and when she speaks English, she does it with a West Indian accent (139). In her last dream, she eats codfish, a typical West Indian dish, and discovers herself at a party where she ends up sleeping with Joe.

Mrs. Rosenberg's dreams reveal her fear of blacks taking over. Unable to explain her dreams, she resorts to believing that Joe must have cast a spell on her. She says: “Me di en imaginar que el Negro Joe podía ser un adepto a la magia negra o al rito del vudú... ¡Tenía que ser así!... El era quien me estaba embrujando...” (143). Mrs. Rosenberg's fears stem from her being raised in Nazi Germany (1933-1936). In a session with her psychiatrist, she confesses her hatred towards blacks and her fear of them assuming control:

Luego, más tarde, cuando me vine a América, noté la mezcla de razas que hay en el Istmo..., la gran desproporción del tipo blanco en relación con los negros... Y, debo confesarlo, sentí la imprescindible necesidad de que triunfara el nuevo orden... Había que exterminar todas las razas de extracción inferior... Y, sobre todo, a los negros... Yo los he visto siempre en mi concepto como una raza esclava... Por eso los detesto... Me producen cierto asco, cierta especie de repulsión... (Sinán *La boina* 132-133)

Mrs. Rosenberg hates not only blacks but also Jews, in other words, everyone who is not of the Aryan race. She detests blacks and is repulsed by them (132-33). Although she is repulsed by blacks, at the end of the story Mrs. Rosenberg finds Joe and has sexual

relations with him. Mrs. Rosenberg's actions demonstrate that she subconsciously feels a secret sexual attraction towards blacks. In the end, Sinán exploits Mrs. Rosenberg's fears by having her realize what she fears subconsciously: a relationship with a black man.

Sinán demonstrates the extent to which society's racism affects the human psyche; it has turned a Jew into an anti-Semite. A victim of racism herself, Mrs. Rosenberg adopts the same racist ideology that was inflicted upon her on the black. Sinán demonstrates the effect of racism and how it causes its victims to victimize others. Anti-colonialist Frantz Fanon explains the Jew's behavior as that of "reactional phenomenon," meaning that in order to react against anti-Semitism, the Jew turns himself into an anti-Semite (183).

Mrs. Rosenberg reacts negatively against Jews and other marginalized races such as the black in the same way that she was treated in Nazi Germany.

In "La boina roja" (1953), Sinán presents another woman who has sexual relations with a black man. Dr. Paul Ecker goes to an island to study fish and is accompanied by his North American secretary Linda Olsen. For some unexplained reason, Linda transforms into a mermaid, becomes pregnant, and has a stillborn child. Linda disappears and it is never determined whether the baby is black, white, a monster, or a mermaid. Like Mrs. Rosenberg, Linda disdains blacks, yet at the same time feels a deep attraction toward them. She explains:

No he de negar que, aunque siento repudio contra los negros,  
no probé desagrado sino más bien placer...Me causaban deleite  
las piruetas y las mil ocurrencias de Joe Ward...joven, fuerte, radiante,  
tenía los dientes blancos y reía con una risa atractiva...La atmósfera de la  
isla y la fragancia de la brisa yodada me lo hicieron mirar embellecido como un

Apolo negro...(Sinán *La boina roja* 27)

In effect, Linda is attracted to blacks because of their exotic nature and mysteriousness.

Both Linda's and Mrs. Rosenberg's attraction for blacks evoke the writings of Frantz Fanon, who argued in *Black Skin, White Masks* (published originally in French in 1952): "For the majority of white men the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state). The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions. The women among the whites, ...view the Negro as the keeper of the impalpable gate that opens into the realm of orgies, of bacchanals, of delirious sexual sensations" (177). Thus, Sinán exposes the fears that whites have about blacks through the dreams of both Mrs. Rosenberg and Linda Olsen. These women's fears control them to the extent that they can no longer function. Sinán reveals the contradictory attitude that whites have about blacks. In "Todo un conflicto" and "La boina roja," blacks symbolize the biological. These women's comments reveal that they have espoused the racist ideology that has been promoted in their respective countries, Germany and the United States, but that they secretly possess an attraction to black men because they represent the sexual. The previously cited assertion of Fanon illustrates that Mrs. Rosenberg's and Linda's attraction to black men stems from their respective countries' national rhetoric of racial intolerance and exclusion that has equated non-whites with the sexual.

In *Plenilunio* (1947), an example of social protest literature, there is another relationship between a white woman and a black man. *Plenilunio* is a surrealist novel that transpires in the mind of the "Author" (without a name). Elena Cunha and Miguel Camargo (Mack Amargo, El Amargo) dialogue with the "Author" to discover which one

killed Elena's husband, Crispín. Ironically, at the end of the novel the characters accuse the author of killing Crispín.

Similar to Linda Olsen and Mrs. Rosenberg, Elena Cunha has sexual relations with a black man during a dream-like state. Although she is married to Crispín, Elena has sexual relations with Mack Amargo who is described as "moreno, casi prieto." Elena denies her relationship with him because it most likely occurred at night during the full moon when she could not control her sexual desires. Through the use of dreams, Sinán exposes the sexual desires of these European women who openly embrace the national rhetoric of black hatred, but secretly view black men as the embodiment of the sexual. This contradiction is not only present in these white women, but also in the white *negrista* writers who demonstrate their sexual attraction towards black women through poetry but have contradictory negative attitudes towards blacks in general.

In *Plenilunio* (1947), Sinán also criticizes the North American presence on the Isthmus and protests discrimination in the Canal Zone. North Americans are viewed as the enemy because they have transformed Panama into a brothel, much like in Korsi's poem "Una visión de Panamá." Although not central to the argument of this novel, Sinán digresses and alludes to racial discrimination and protests the unfair and unequal pay in the Canal Zone. According to Mack Amargo:

Los gringos, ya tú sabes, se desviven hablando de buena vecindad, de buen trato, *new deal* y otras cosas; pero, con todo y eso, nunca olvidan las discriminaciones raciales: Los blancos, por un lado; por el otro, los negros... En eso no transigen... Y los blancos son ellos; los demás somos negros, gente ruín, *rol de plata*... (Sinán *Plenilunio* 38)

The racial discrimination is not only against blacks, but also against non-black Panamanians. North Americans imposed their racial system on the Isthmus and viewed all Panamanians as black.

While Sinán may reveal sexual myths that white women possess towards black men, he reinforces these stereotypes by not presenting a well-balanced picture of positive and negative images of blacks. Moreover, blacks in Sinán's works are objects of white desire instead of subjects. By portraying such one-dimensional characters, Sinán strengthens these stereotypes instead of denouncing them. More importantly, Sinán also supports the stereotype that racism does not exist in Panama. In these works, North Americans and other foreigners are racists and not the Panamanians. As Carlos Guillermo Wilson suggests: "Los personajes racistas son foráneos. En gran parte no se presenta la realidad panameña en cuanto a las injusticias que sufre el panameño Negro" ("Aspectos" 158). Although he satirizes the behavior of Mrs. Rosenberg, Linda Olsen, and Elena Cunha for their racist behavior and secret attraction to black men, Sinán fails to recognize the prejudices by Panamanians against Afro-Hispanics and Afro-Antilleans. His prose serves to reinforce the notion that racism is not a product of Panama but of the United States. By portraying foreigners as those who promote racism, Sinán absolves Panamanians from any responsibility for racism on the Isthmus. In turn, he reinforces the myth that Panama was a racial utopia before the United States arrived.

### ***Conclusions***

The image of the black in Panamanian literature of the early twentieth century establishes many of the themes that will emerge in Afro-Panamanian literature during the latter half of the twentieth century. Víctor M. Franceschi, Demetrio Korsi, and Rogelio

Sinán made an effort to portray blacks in their works. Although their representation of blacks demonstrates the myths that Panamanians had about them, including their sexuality, musical abilities, and animal instincts, it does not recognize the social problems that blacks confronted during the early twentieth century or their ability to respond to those very same problems rationally and actively. Perhaps Franceschi's and Korsi's contributions include the recognition that black folklore constitutes an important part of Panamanian culture and should be reflected in its literature. The prose of Sinán surpasses the poetry of Franceschi and Korsi because it explores the effects of racism on the human psyche. However, his works do not acknowledge that the real problem lies on the Isthmus and not outside. Although it seeks to protest racism as evidenced by Mrs. Rosenberg, the lack of character development depicts blacks as purely biological. In general, black characters in the works of Franceschi, Korsi, and Sinán are objectified and viewed outside of an Afro-centered subjectivity. Their characterization, or lack there of, resulted from stereotypical images of blacks during the period.

Panamanian literature published after 1930 often protests the United States presence and has an increasing number of representations, both positive and negative, of the by-product of the Canal: the Panamanian of West Indian descent. These themes emerge in the social protest literature and poetry of the 1930s and 1940s by non-blacks and foreshadow the novel of the canal that centers on the denouncement of the United States and U.S. imperialism that will be analyzed in the next chapter.

### Chapter three

#### **The Social Protest Novels of Joaquín Beleño Cedeño: A Study of the Inherent Conflicts and Contradictions of Anti-imperialism and Negritude in the Canal Zone**

"Es más bien el Canal, abierto gracias al ingenio del hombre, el que ha constituido hasta ahora el medio básico de nuestra vida. La república nació por obra del Canal y ha venido derivando de esta obra de dominio de las fuerzas telúricas, la razón de su existir. "

Ismael García (*Medio siglo 11*)

During the construction of the Canal, Panamanians hoped to liberate themselves from Colombia and open their borders to the modern world. The United States helped Panama gain its independence from Colombia in 1903 and then took control of the Panama Canal while it brought approximately 40,000 West Indians to the Isthmus during the first decades of the twentieth century (Duncan *Teoría* 61). As a result, Afro-Antillean immigration from the British and French West Indies, coupled with the large United States presence on the Isthmus, destroyed Panama's hopes of becoming a *mestizo* nation devoid of any "visible" African heritage. Moreover, the Isthmus quickly discovered that it was being ruled by yet another hegemonic power.

The United States not only took over construction of the Canal, but also transformed all aspects of Zonian life. Furthermore, the United States imposed a racial hierarchy that differed from the Latin American model which categorized blacks according to appearance and not the presence of African blood. This proved to be problematic since nineteenth-century Panama was already a nation characterized by racial diversity where blacks represented a significant portion of the population (Smart *Central American* 10). Not surprisingly, the racism imposed by the United States was based on its polarized racial system, that is, black versus white, with no variations in between.

***Panama and the Jim Crow Legacy***

Many United States soldiers deployed in the Canal Zone were raised in the racially segregated South and were highly influenced by the racist climate of the period, one which was fueled by the implementation of what became known as Jim Crow laws in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> The practice of Jim Crow led to segregation laws that banned interracial marriages and called for separate public facilities for blacks and whites. Jim Crow laws deprived African-Americans of their civil rights by defining blacks as inferior to whites as a result of a caste system of subordinate people.

Sociologist Jesse Dees describes the racial subjugation as follows:

Sociologically, the words “Jim Crow” refer to the concept of accommodation or process of adjustment by the “inferior” Negro to the “superior” Caucasian (especially Nordic or Anglo-saxon) group....“Jim Crow,” therefore, describes the accommodation of the Negro to the above social pattern -- an accommodation to a racial struggle that has existed over 300 years.... In brief, it applies to the position of the Negro in American Society and the words “Jim Crow” are synonymous to the words -- “segregation” and “discrimination.” (2)

United States soldiers internalized this racist mentality and, regardless of skin tone, everyone of African descent was considered to be black and, above all, inferior to whites.

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<sup>15</sup> According to Davis, “The term Jim Crow originated in a song performed by Daddy Rice, a white minstrel show entertainer in the 1830s. Rice covered his face with charcoal paste cork to resemble a black man, and then sang and danced a routine...By the 1850s, this Jim Crow character, one of several stereotypical images of black inferiority in the nation’s popular culture, was a standard act in the minstrel shows of the day” (1-2).

In effect, racial discrimination on the Isthmus was modeled after the United States racial paradigm of the "one drop rule"<sup>16</sup>.

Because the United States could not legally enforce Jim Crow laws in Panama, it created a pay system for Canal Zone workers that reflected Jim Crow practices of the South. The pay system classified workers as Gold Roll and Silver Roll employees. Those designated as Gold Roll employees were primarily whites from the United States, and those on the Silver Roll were "colored" Panamanians and black West Indians (Conniff 32-36).<sup>17</sup> Gold Roll employees earned twice as much as Silver Roll employees for the same position. Black Panamanians and Afro-Antilleans were not only paid less, they were also not allowed to use the same facilities as those used by United States soldiers (e.g., the commissary and the restrooms). There were even separate schools designated for United States soldiers and Anglophone West Indians, even though their native language was the same. In effect, the Jim Crow system in Panama maintained an imperialistic society which reinforced racism (Conniff 35).

The Jim Crow system failed to recognize the diversity of the racial and ethnic composition of Panama and, by extension, of Latin America. Because the strict racial paradigm in the United States did not allow for Panama's racial ambiguities, it relegated all people of color to rigid categories that oscillated between *blanco* and *moreno*. As a result, a dual racial hierarchy formed in Panama during the early twentieth century--i.e., the one found in the Canal Zone and the other in the regions of the interior. While the Canal Zone's racial hierarchy was patterned after the binary model of the United States,

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<sup>16</sup> In the United States, if a person has one drop of African blood he/she is considered to be black.

<sup>17</sup> I use the term "colored" here to designate all non-white Panamanians including *mestizos*, *mulatos*, and blacks.

the one in the interior followed the Latin American *mestizo* model. Because Panamanians had always prided themselves on not being black, those who were now considered to be *negro* began to harbor deep resentment against the United States.

Consisting primarily of white Panamanian elites, the Panamanian oligarchy manipulated the United States binary racial code to subordinate non-white Panamanians to the category of blacks. Conniff explains this as follows:

White Panamanians, who had been aware of American racism from the start, learned how to manipulate it for their own benefit... Since Panamanian prejudices were milder than American ones, the net effect was less disadvantageous to the native mestizos and blacks than to the West Indians, who had to contend with racism in the Canal Zone and chauvinism in Panama. Panamanians rarely admitted to race prejudice, and when they did, they could blame the Americans for having introduced it. (42-43)

Obviously, racial discrimination in the Canal Zone did not stem solely from the prejudices of the United States soldiers. However, the racist nature of imperialism provided Panamanians with an easy scapegoat for their own racial prejudices.

Threatened by the increasing number of blacks on the Isthmus, the color-conscious upper-class Panamanians did not protest the unfair treatment of the Canal Zone; rather they blamed the United States for the social injustices (McCullough 576). While white Panamanians manipulated the racist paradigm to their advantage which allowed them to maintain their status as minority elites, colored Panamanians found ways to distinguish themselves from other blacks as well. In effect, Panamanians of color had already begun to internalize this racist paradigm which taught that people of color were second class

citizens. Because the United States categorization did not racially distinguish Panamanians from Afro-Antilleans, Panamanians and Afro-Panamanians expressed their racism by adopting a cultural discourse of superiority and exclusion. That is, they distinguished themselves from the West Indian population based on cultural and linguistic differences.

### ***Social Protest Literature***

Unequal conditions and treatment in the Canal Zone led to a literature that protested the racial, social, and economic inequities that resulted from the construction of the Canal. Dissatisfied with the United States disregard for their rights as an autonomous nation, Panamanian writers, like many throughout Latin America, lashed out at the United States for imposing a neocolonial regime.

In general, the novels of social protest attained special importance in Latin America in the early 1900s when they directed attention to the social conditions of the native populations whose suffering was due to the exploitation by the *terratenientes* or landowners. This interest in the social conditions of the rural areas led to the *indigenista* movement of the 1920s and 1930s and was concentrated in the Andean region. These novels demonstrated “[the] mistreatment of Andean Indians by well-off white landowners and the *mestizos* to whom they delegated power over their estates” (Lindstrom 50). Similarly, Panama desired to return to its autochthonous roots as a means of contesting social abuses as well as all threats against its autonomy. Indeed, anti-imperialism had been a major theme in Latin American literature since the turn of the twentieth century and had motivated many intellectuals such as José Enrique Rodó and José Martí to unite their respective countries against foreign domination.

The Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó (1871-1917) in his seminal essay *Ariel* (1900) proposed that the hope of Latin America lied in its spirituality that was based on an overarching appreciation of aesthetics and western classical traditions symbolized by the statue of Ariel. In effect, *Ariel* was the affirmation of the superiority of Spanish America's high Culture over the technical progress of the United States. Reminiscent of Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, Rodó argued through the figures of Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban that Latin America, with its rich Greco-Roman heritage, was superior to the United States which had lost its cultural direction due to its utilitarianism and mercantilism. This material focus was symbolized by Caliban, portrayed as a slave to the utilitarianism of the modern world. The Cuban essayist and poet, Jose Martí (1853-1895), was another Latin American intellectual who opposed United States hegemony. However, unlike Rodó's idealist project, which emphasized the spiritual leisure of a gifted elite, Martí emphasized social equality across races and the creation of a new intellectual tradition rooted in Latin America and not Europe. In the essay *Nuestra América* (1891), Martí proposed a unified Latin America based on the equality of races and recognized that imperialism was a threat to the country's progress in the twentieth century.

Latin America responded to United States imperialism in several ways; many countries would find hope in communism and socialism, movements which prompted the establishment of labor unions, uprisings, and revolts against the unfair working conditions and wages that affected the region's working poor (Alexander 5). In opposition to the United States, these movements led to agrarian, economic, and university reforms (Alba 116). Although the socialist movement was concentrated

primarily in countries with strong European immigration such as Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, other countries such as Perú found that socialism offered a solution to their economic problems (115). The major exponent of Peruvian socialism was José Mariátegui (1894-1930), who argued that Perú's foundation was based on the Incan communal system, the *ayllu*, and that socialism was the means to restore Perú's foundation as an indigenous nation. With regard to Panama and the unfair working conditions in the Canal Zone, Panama's working class was relatively small and those who had jobs feared reprisal from the United States government. Although socialism was not as strong in Panama as it was in other Latin American countries, its first communist and socialist parties were formed on the Isthmus in 1925 and 1933, respectively (Alexander 391; 392).

In addition, the majority of workers in Panama affected by the unequal pay system and poor working conditions were immigrants. However, two of these immigrants from Barbados, William Preston Stoute and Samuel Inis, organized a labor strike and demanded a salary increase, benefits, and the implementation of an eight hour workday. After the strike, Stoute was exiled from Panama, but his efforts were not in vain; the strikes resulted in the establishment of a labor union for workers in 1924 (Szok *La última* 55).

During the aftermath of World War II (1939-1944), a nationalist spirit resurfaced in Latin America and communism became increasingly popular in Panama (Alexander 6, 393). In 1947, students from the National Institute carried Panama's flag in demonstrations opposing the Filós-Hines treaty, an agreement between the United States

ambassador Frank Hines and the Panamanian Foreign Minister Francisco Filós.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, while many writers such as José Isaac Fábrega (1900-1986) sought to return to Panama's interior in search of *panameñidad*, as depicted in his novel *Crisol* (1936), others focused on the problems of the urban sectors located in the cities of Panama and Colón. These writers protested another type of injustice, that of the United States. United States imperialism initially led to a social protest literature rooted in Panama's interior that characterized Panama as a Hispanic nation free from foreign influence. However, the discrimination that marked life in the Canal Zone with its unfair social practices eventually contributed to the expansion of protest literature. That is, the *novela del canal*, or the novel of the Canal Zone in Panama, emerged from the above-mentioned social protest tradition.

***Literary Antecedents of the “novela del canal”***

Since 1903, when the United States helped Panama achieve independence from Colombia and assumed control and occupied the Canal Zone, the Panama Canal has been a major theme in Panamanian literature. Moreover, the Canal Zone became a prevalent theme in Panamanian literature because Panamanians grew increasingly hostile to and resentful of United States occupation and domination. Because United States imperialism and the construction of the Canal influenced much of the writing during this period, the production of poetic negrism, an artistic movement associated with the Avant-garde movement, was hindered. Thus, poetic negrism did not flourish in Panama as it

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<sup>18</sup> The Filós-Hines treaty was negotiated to prolong United States possession of the military bases. The deal was signed and announced on December 10, 1947, but it was reversed two weeks later (León Jiménez 15).

had in other countries with similar large African descendant populations such as Cuba and Puerto Rico because Panama, like the Dominican Republic, ignored its large African population and feared that the country would turn into another Haiti. This fear, coupled with United States occupation of the Canal, encouraged, instead, the development of the novel of the Canal.

Unlike the romantic and *modernista* eras, when Panamanians used poetry to sing patriotic praises to the nation, the Canal Zone became a theme in many Panamanian novels during the first decades of the twentieth century. Writers made references to the Canal Zone which directly or indirectly criticized United States imperialism (Sepúlveda 16). These novels included *Josefina* (1903), *Las noches de Babel* (1913), *Crisol* (1936), and *Plenilunio* (1947) and established the literary precedent for a major genre, the novel of the Canal, which characterized Panamanian literature of the late nineteen forties, fifties, and sixties.<sup>19</sup>

As Panamanians became increasingly hostile to United States abuses and its occupation of the Canal Zone, more writers turned away from Panama's autochthonous interior and concentrated on urban Panama. Writers who focused on life in Panama's cities, especially Panama City and Colón, were the first to recognize that *panameñidad* existed not only in the country's interior, as Fábrega illustrated in *Crisol* (1936), but that

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<sup>19</sup>See chapter two for discussion of José Isaac Fábrega's (1900-1986) *Crisol* (1936) and Rogelio Sinán's (1904-1992) *Plenilunio* (1947). Julio Ardila's (1865-1918) *Josefina* (1903) is a *modernista* novel that mentions several historical facts related to the Canal involving both the French and United States occupation (Sepúlveda 14). Ricardo Miró's (1883-1940) *Las noches de Babel* (1913), published one year before completion of the Canal, chronicles the adventures of a romantic poet, Rafael Urmaña y Calderón, and depicts a society that is now affected by the construction of the Canal as well as United States imperialism (17-18). For more information on literary precedents of the *novela del canal* and other novels of the Canal, see Mélida Ruth Sepúlveda's *El tema del canal en la novelística panameña* (1975) and Mirna M. Pérez-Venero's thesis, "Raza, color y prejuicios en la novelística contemporánea de tema canalero" (1973).

Panama City and Colón were also a vital part of Panamanian culture. *Panameñidad* no longer focused on Panama's interior in Coclé, Penonomé, Veraguas, Herrera, and Los Santos; writers now viewed Panama City and Colón as major sites of interest because of the construction of the Canal and its rapid growth. Therefore, the novel of the Canal not only made references to United States imperialism, but the entire action of the novels centered on the complexities of the Canal as a catalyst for social change and conflict in Panama. For the purposes of this study, the novel of the Canal will be defined according to Pérez-Venero's explanation:

Consideraremos como novelas canleras aquellas que utilizan como fondo la Zona del Canal; las que tratan de las influencias de la Zona del Canal, y no solamente de los Estados Unidos en la vida panameña y las que refieren la historia de la construcción del canal y de la vida y el trabajo de los americanos y panameños en la Zona durante varias épocas después de la construcción del Canal. ("Raza"16)

Unlike novels such as *Crisol*, which proclaimed a racial utopia, the novel of the Canal sought to demystify the national rhetoric of racial harmony propagated during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and exposed racial discrimination on the Isthmus. Novels that followed this pattern include Rodolfo Aguilera Jr.'s (1909-1989) *50 millas de heroicidad* (1941), Renato Ozores' (1910) *Puente del mundo* (1951), Gil Blas Tejeira's (1901-1975) *Pueblos perdidos* (1963), and Yolanda Camarano de Sucre's (1915-2000) *La doña del paz* (1967).<sup>20</sup> While these novels addressed the historical and

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<sup>20</sup> *50 millas de heroicidad* (1941) chronicles the construction of the Canal (Miró *La literatura panameña* 54). Renato Ozores' (1910) *Puente del mundo* (1951) examines four generations of the Lander family who

economic aspects of the construction of the Panama Canal, the Canal Zone novels of Joaquín Beleño Cedeño concentrated on the psychological effects that the United States presence had on Panamanian and West Indian workers. As a result, the interest in the urban areas of Panama City and Colón contributed to a burgeoning literature that focused on the Canal Zone and served as a platform for Beleño to denounce United States racism, imperialism, and exploitation.

### ***Joaquín Beleño C.***

Joaquín Beleño Cedeño (1922-1988) was born in Panama City in the poor neighborhood of Santa Ana. Born to a Panamanian mother of black colonial descent and a Colombian father from Cartagena de las Indias, Beleño was not only a novelist, but also a prolific journalist who contributed to the newspapers *La Hora*, through his column “Temas áridos,” and to *La República* (Strom 4). Beleño received his college degree in public and business administration from the University of Panama; he also participated in the student movement of 1940, and worked as a laborer in the Canal Zone where he kept a diary which served as a future resource for his Canal Zone trilogy (Strom 3; Padrón 15). Beleño published four novels, including the trilogy, which will be discussed below: *Luna*

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witness the construction of the Panamanian Railroad (1850-55), the French Canal (1880-1903), and the Panama Canal (1904-1914). As the title suggests, the novel explores the effects of Panama’s geographic position and the subsequent exploitation of it (García *Historia* 167). *Pueblos perdidos* (1963) reveals the destruction of towns located in areas that were exploited economically to meet the needs of the Canal (Martínez *Diccionario* 138). Yolanda Camarano de Sucre’s *La doña del paz* (1967) focuses on historical aspects of the years prior to the construction of the Canal (Pérez-Venero “Raza” 17). It should be remembered that writers outside of the Isthmus also focused on problems of the Canal Zone. The Ecuadorian writer Demetrio Aguilera Malta’s (1900-1981) *Canal Zone* (1935) condemned United States imperialism and racial discrimination as it chronicled a youth’s (Pedro Coorsi) struggle to find his place during United States occupation of Panama. Colombia’s José Manuel Restrepo’s (1781-1863) *Dinero para los peces* (1945) described the effect of United States domination in Panama during the early twentieth century (Pérez-Venero “Raza” 11). In effect, the Canal Zone not only attracted national attention, but it concerned writers from all over Latin America who condemned and protested United States imperialism in general.

*verde* (1951), *Curundú* (1956) (written in 1946), and *Gamboa Road Gang*, also known as *Los forzados de Gamboa* (1961). Beleño's last published novel was *Flor de banana* (1965) in which he condemned the United Fruit Company for its discriminatory practices.<sup>21</sup>

Beleño's trilogy not only deals with problems of United States imperialism and discrimination in the Canal Zone, but it also presents characters who until this period rarely appeared in Panamanian literature. Specifically, Beleño presents the Afro-Hispanic, that is, the *moreno* or *mulato* who is a descendant of colonial blacks, and the Afro-Antillean, a descendant of British or French West Indian immigrants. Beleño first became familiar with the West Indian population on the Isthmus as a youngster growing up in Santa Ana and, then, as a Canal Zone worker in 1940. His characterization of both the Afro-Hispanic and the Afro-West Indian brings to light the issues of race and identity as they affect life in the Canal Zone on the one hand, and his own racial identity on the other.

While Ruth Melida Sepúlveda, Ian I. Smart, Diana L. Strom, and Mirna Pérez-Venero do not classify Beleño as either a "black" writer or as a writer of African descent, the Panamanian writer Justo Arroyo is one of the few who considers him to be of African descent.<sup>22</sup> He notes: "Beleño, a Black writer, shows, as a 'colonial' Black, how the distrust and distancing produce a form of internal racism" (158). Thomas Edison also recognizes Beleño's origins, stating that his mother was a colonial black (317). To add to the uncertainty and ambiguity of his racial background, Beleño himself does not mention

<sup>21</sup> *Flor de banana* deviates from the Canal Zone theme and treats the exploitation of the native populations in Chiriquí, a region located in Panama's interior.

<sup>22</sup> In his seminal work *Central American Writers of West Indian Origin*, Smart considers Beleño to be a non-West Indian precursor to Panamanian West Indian literature, but he does not mention Beleño's race.

any racial affiliation in his one page autobiography published in 1960 in the Panamanian literary journal *Revista Lotería*. Pérez-Venero's interview with the author, however, provides some insight into his personal feelings about race and discriminatory practices against indigenous and colonial blacks on the Isthmus: "Por ejemplo, se refiere a las palabras 'negro' y 'cholo' que generalmente, en Latinoamérica tienen una connotación cariñosa; Beleño siente que en la Zona estas palabras encierran sólo un significado negativo que él ha llegado a sentir personalmente" ("Raza" 106).

Beleño's racial ambiguity highlights the dilemma of the Afro-Hispanic writer in Panama who often feels pressured to adopt a national ideology that proclaims "todos somos panameños," and therefore erases any ethnic or racial identification from the national imaginary. As discussed in chapter one, this trend was also evident in the writings of José Dolores Urriola, Federico Escobar, Simón Rivas, and Gaspar Octavio Hernández who, as poets writing during the nationalist project, were torn between representing their country or their race. Although it is difficult to determine Beleño's own racial identity, these factors and the various classifications of his own racial background are important when examining his treatment of Zonian racial discrimination in the Canal Zone trilogy as well as his representations of Afro-Hispanics and Afro-Antilleans.

***From Social Protest to Testimonial: The Trilogy as Novels in Transition***

As already mentioned, *Luna verde* (1951), *Curundú* (1956), and *Gamboia Road Gang* (1961) are social protest novels that denounce United States imperialism. Consistent with many social protest novels whose message obscures their other narrative components, the trilogy's characters are one-dimensional products of an essentialist

perspective where Beleño often exaggerates United States imperialism to prove his point. Moreover, these characters' plight is controlled by an environment over which they have no control. Notwithstanding the texts' essentialisms, Beleño overcomes the limitations of the social protest novel by problematizing the human condition, and his novels do not always point to simplistic explanations (Ruiloba 93-94). Basically the novels depicted are grounded on the reality of the Canal Zone, much of it witnessed by Beleño himself as a Canal Zone worker, and are testimonies of individual experiences of workers and prisoners. Finally, the trilogy uses narrative techniques that characterize the contemporary novel (e.g., stream of consciousness and interior monologue) which enable Beleño to surpass the traditional social protest novel form.

The novelty of the trilogy is that each work possesses features of the social protest novel as well as those of the testimonial narrative, a genre in Latin America that was recognized for the first time in 1970, when Cuba's *Casa de las Americas* created the literary prize for testimonial literature. *Biografía de un cimarrón*, published in 1966 by the Cuban writer Miguel Barnet, was the first novel to receive this award in 1970. Other writers such as Elena Poniatowska also "helped legitimate documentary writers' artistic freedom to rework the material they had gathered, resulting in a text that was the writer's own" (Lindstrom 210). Although there were other testimonial narratives written before Barnet's, few received recognition in the literary canon (Gugelberger 54).

The trilogy's approximation to the testimonial is no surprise because testimonial literature "involves the use of techniques borrowed from fiction to present narrative data taken from real-world events" (Lindstrom 207). In addition, "the situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate a problem of repression, poverty,

subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival and so on... Testimonial writing, as the word indicates promotes expression of personal experience. The personal experience, of course, is the collective struggle against oppression from oligarchy, military, and transnational capital” (Beverley 26; Yúdice 54). Beleño’s trilogy shares aspects of the testimonial narrative (e.g., collective struggles and economic and racial oppression) and effectively communicates the impact of United States imperialism on the Canal Zone. Because the characters are primarily inventions of the author (even though they may be based on historical figures), they can not be considered true testimonials of the Canal Zone experience. As such, this study will refer to each novel as a *novela-testimonio*, a term that Beverley uses to describe “narrative texts where an ‘author’ in the conventional sense has either invented a testimonio-like story, or... extensively reworked, with explicitly literary goals (greater figurative density, tighter narrative form, elimination of digressions and interruptions, and so on), a testimonial account that is no longer present as such except in its simulacrum” (38). Although the texts are not true testimonials, they do share such aspects of the genre as first-person narration and historical authenticity. Thus, they constitute a transitional phase that links the social protest genre and the *testimonio*.

With the exception of *Curundú*, these novels stand out for their first-person narration. While they denounce, exaggerate, repeat and at times possess underdeveloped characters, there is a first-person narrator who shares the trials and tribulations of the other characters. The narrators stress that they are sharing their personal experiences with the reader based on memories, recollections, and testimonies of the various protagonists who fill the text. This is important because one of the key features of

testimonial literature is that the narration “is told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience” (Beverley 24).

Before analyzing the three novels, some background information will be helpful. *Luna verde* is the personal diary of Ramón de Roquebert, a Panamanian of French origin (non-West Indian), that transpires between 1942 and 1947. The story is told by two narrators, "un narrador extradiegético que narra un plural ficticio," and "un narrador intradiegético"<sup>23</sup>(Ramón) (Villareal Castillo 44). The novel chronicles the migration of Ramón from rural Río Hato to the urban area of Panama to work in the Canal Zone in Milla Cuatro. As a Milla Cuatro worker, he has an accident, returns to his native Río Hato and then goes back to Panama to work in the Canal Zone where he is killed during an anti-imperialist student demonstration in 1947. Ramón participates in a student demonstration against the signing of the Filós-Hines treaty (1947) which granted the United States permission to construct military bases outside the Canal Zone.

The prologue emphasizes that the text is a “diario dialogado,” and the narrator/protagonist Ramón explains: “Hago relato de todas las cosas que me van sucediendo con claro temor...” (88). On the one hand, *Luna verde* is “una copia fiel de la realidad en sus diferentes dimensiones,” and on the other, it is a testimonial in diary form of Ramón’s experiences while working in the Canal Zone (7). Ramón records his relationships with his relatives and fellow Canal Zone workers Rodrigo, Sandino, and René Conquista.

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<sup>23</sup> An extradiegetic narrator is one who relates the events of the story but does not participate in the action. An intradiegetic narrator is also a character in the novel.

Ramón confesses that he is an avid reader of “revolutionary books” such as *Huasipungo* (1934), *En las calles* (1935), *La vorágine* (1924), *Los de abajo* (1916), *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926), *La trepadora* (1925), *Doña Bárbara* (1929), *Jubiabá* (1935), and *Cacao* (1933) (88-89). Like the writers of early twentieth-century Latin American literature, Ramón desires to denounce, attack, and give a voice to subaltern populations. However, he is not exclusively defending the native and rural populations as many of these novelists did. Instead, he champions the causes of the urban sectors, that is, the *mestizo*, the *mulato*, the *negro*, and the *chombo* populations which are discriminated against in the Canal Zone. Ramón notes the effect of this protest literature:

He deseado con vehemencia lanzar como sus escritores, un grito íntimo contra la miseria, contra la explotación, contra el hambre; y heme aquí día y noche con los bolsillos repletos de dólares, codeándome con centenares de hombres que ganan dinero y sufren miseria. (89)

The second novel in the trilogy, *Curundú* (1956), fluctuates between the chronicle and the testimonial and documents the moral, spiritual, and physical decline of Rubén Galván (Ruiloba 83). As an anti-bildungsroman novel, it chronicles the trials and tribulations of a youth who searches for the meaning of life which ends in moral and spiritual decadence. The traditional Bildungsroman, or “novela de aprendizaje,” chronicles a youth’s hardships and usually ends in some positive way where the youth overcomes these struggles to assume his place in society. The anti-bildungsroman defies this tradition and ends with the youth’s destruction or inability to overcome adversity and to become a productive worker of the adult world. Although Françoise Perús does not characterize the text as an anti-bildungsroman, she notes that it does not share the same

characteristics of the traditional one: “Sin embargo y contrariamente a la tradición europea del Bildungsroman, no constituye propiamente la reconstrucción de la trayectoria evolutiva de una conciencia individual en el proceso de su apropiación del mundo natural y social” (35).

As in *Luna verde*, the principal protagonist, Rubén, forms relationships with other Canal Zone workers including the Panamanian, Lobo Guerrero, and the West Indians, Red Box, Tamtam, Liequí, and Salvador Brown, who are all Silver Roll employees. Rubén engages in premarital sex at the age of eleven, and lured by the high wages of the Canal Zone, he spends his holidays working in Fort Clayton at the age of sixteen. Ultimately, Rubén dies after being attacked in a church by United States soldiers.

Written before *Luna verde* in 1946, *Curundú* transpires at the beginning of World War II and was conceived during the summer of 1940 when Beleño worked at the Canal Zone’s Clayton military base. *Curundú* describes the psychological effects that arise when one culture imposes its way of life on another, and as an adolescent, Rubén has no effective way of dealing with this domination. The following passage suggests the psychological impact that the neocolonial regime had on Rubén: “Por encima de Rubén Galván existe un país agresivo que ha elaborado el concepto abstracto de la palabra democracia que no expresa ninguna idea clara en la mentalidad indisciplinada de un adolescente, en conflicto con su propia tragedia” (157). The phrase “por encima,” which is used frequently throughout the text, reinforces the idea that Rubén, who dies at the end, has no control over his environment, and by extension, falls prey to the hegemonic socio-political order that has destroyed everything native in Panama.

While *Luna verde* and *Curundú* treat the problems of imperialism and religious intolerance, *Gamboa Road Gang* (1961) protests both the racial discrimination of the Canal Zone and United States imperialism at the same time it examines the search for identity of a black West-Indian Panamanian. This final novel in the trilogy documents the story of Arthur Ryams, or “Atá,” who is sentenced to fifty years in prison for the rape of a United States Zonian, Annabelle. Beleño’s examples of the social injustice of the *latifundio zoneita*, or Canal Zone, and racial discrimination demonstrate that his primary objective in writing *Gamboa* is to attack United States imperialism as a disruptive force that has exacerbated past racisms while, at the same time, it has created social conditions that have transformed Panama and its national imaginary. The narrator explains: “Esta también es la historia de mi patria compendiada, pensé. Todo el continente creyó que sucumbiríamos atropellados por la civilización saxo-americana...Oodian a los gringos, porque no se apoderan de nosotros y nos liquidan” (39).

*Gamboa* is based on the real life story of Lester León Greaves, who was accused of raping a white woman and sentenced to fifty years in prison. Historically, the text resulted in Greaves’ liberation from prison in 1962 (Strom 5). It is *Gamboa*’s historical veracity and denouncement of United States racism that position it between the social protest novel and the *novela-testimonio*. In effect, *Gamboa* approximates the *novela-testimonio* because its narrator is a victim of unfair treatment in the Canal Zone.

The narrator is an accountant sentenced to three years in prison for embezzling money from the Canal Zone. Identified as prisoner 33, and known as chief by the other inmates, the narrator shares the hopelessness and desperation of the prisoners. His narration becomes a personal testimony of his experiences as well as those of the other

prisoners. For this reason he asserts: “Estas son mis confesiones y lo que diga de los demás puede ser aceptado o rechazado” (Beleño *Gamboa* 180).

Prisoner 33 is not the typical omniscient narrator of the novels of social protest who portrays the adversities of a marginalized group. He becomes a part of this marginalized group because as he states: “por lo menos, en la prisión, todos éramos iguales, todos convictos y todos amargados”(20). It is in prison that these characters from different racial and socio-economic groups achieve a form of equality through their shared experiences and hopes for liberation. Like *Luna verde* and *Curundú*, *Gamboa Road Gang* is a transitional novel. While it protests and denounces United States imperialism, it provides a first person narrative of the injustices committed in the Canal Zone as represented by the incarceration of six men, that of Atá, prisoner 33 (narrator), Franklin Delano Owen, Belisario Porras, Nicanor Miranda, and August Mildred.

Our analysis of *Luna verde* (1951), *Curundú* (1956) and *Gamboa Road Gang* (1961) will focus on four defining themes: descriptive exoticism, anti-imperialism, anti-West Indian sentiment, and the emergence of the new Panamanian, the West Indian. Although each of the works does not develop all four themes, the latter are overarching concerns that characterize twentieth-century Panamanian literature and can be traced from the representation of blacks during the *negrista* period discussed in chapter two. Moreover, the themes are interrelated and illuminate the difficulty of an emerging Panamanian identity and the country’s continued struggle to be recognized as an autonomous nation.

**Luna verde and Foreign Intolerance in the Canal Zone**

*Luna verde* illustrates the complexities of Panamanian identity through its characterizations of the *gringa* and the *mulato*, both products of the Canal. Although Beleño attempts to bring to light the new ethnic compositions that now characterize Panama, his descriptions often lead to one-dimensional characterizations. As a result, *Luna verde* is typical of much of the social protest literature of the 1920s and 1930s in its one-dimensional characterizations and repetitions, especially when it pertains to denouncing the United States. These simplistic descriptions exist in Panamanian literature, albeit to a lesser extent than in the literature of the Hispanic Caribbean. Although the trilogy denounces imperialism and United States treatment of marginalized groups on the Isthmus, the texts often exaggerate or stereotype the West Indian population on the Isthmus. In *Luna verde*, these characterizations lead to essentialist descriptions of the two primary figures mentioned above: the *gringa* and the *mulato*.

White women are attracted to black men in *Luna verde* and therefore exist primarily to satisfy the male sexual appetite and serve as vehicles to denounce imperialism. In *negrista* literature, black women were typically portrayed as seductive temptresses who destroyed their victims (Williams 69). Beleño substitutes this negative image of the black woman with that of the *gringa*. His descriptions of the *gringa* possess the same sexual attributes that *negrista* writers used to characterize the *mulata*, *mestiza*, and *negra*. Thus, the descriptions of the *gringa* mirror those of the *mulata* who dates back to nineteenth-century Spanish American literature. In *Luna verde*, Ramón's description of a white woman is reminiscent of the *negrista* period when *mulatas*, *negras*, and *zambas* were described as a kind of forbidden fruit.

Te amo, gringa-gringuita de piel sin carotén y xantofila; blanca de ausencia de mi sol, intocada de mi raza. ¡Oh fiesta de la raza de mi cuerpo y el tuyo! [...] Déjame olerte a gringa-gringa, déjame reír en tu boca, locamente, hasta que mi raza contagie tu raza, tu mandíbula ponderosa de sajona dominante...(139)

In *negrista* literature, exotic and sensual descriptions of the *mulata* provided folklore and primarily served to satisfy the male's sexual appetite. However, the sexual description of the *gringa* in this text serves a different purpose: to obtain revenge against the United States. The passage strongly suggests revenge against the *gringa*, a revenge that no doubt stems from Ramón's anger against the United States. In effect, Ramón desires to dominate the white race (“contagie tu raza”) by darkening it, and it is evident that he uses the *gringa* as his only weapon to fight against imperialism.

As evidenced by the above description of the *gringa*, Beleño's characterization serves to criticize United States imperialism and illustrates the injustice that United States soldiers brought to the Isthmus. Beleño's texts denounce unfair wages paid under the Silver Roll and the Gold Roll, and they criticize treatment of Panamanian and Afro-Antillean women by the United States. Ramón's grandfather, Don Porfirio de Roquebert, abhors the United States arrogance, as well as the soldiers' abuse of women on the Isthmus (224, 226). The lasciviousness of the United States soldiers who sexually take advantage of Panamanian women disturbs him the most. Consumed with hatred, he kills the North American who was in love with his daughter. Porfirio describes to his grandson, Ramón, what incites his hatred:

Odio a los gringos porque ellos tratan de humillar a todo cuanto ayudan. Ellos saben reír y saben dominar. Entonces se hacen dueños de todo cuanto quieren.

Yo he visto morir a los hombres como arrieras en Culebra...Ellos dicen que el canal es de ellos. Pero mienten porque allí trabajamos todos los hombres de la tierra; vinimos de Europa, de Africa, de Asia y de América...Pero los gringos se han apoderado de esa obra y ellos exclusivamente pretenden ser los dueños absolutos. Y fue por eso por lo que lo maté. (226-27)

In effect, the relationship that Don Porfirio's daughter had with a United States soldier symbolizes both the rape of the Isthmus and that of the Panamanian woman. Thus, the invention of the female stereotype of black sexuality and promiscuity on the one hand, and the purity and chastity of the white woman on the other, emerges as an expansion of *negrista* literature in the 1920s.

Interestingly enough, Beleño's texts do not merely idealize the *gringa* or *mulata*, but also idealize the *mulato*. The *mestizo*, *mulato*, and *chombo* of mixed racial ancestry are now described as exotic creatures. Beleño appropriates this romantic discourse and applies it to the male West Indian, Sandino, who is half East Indian and half West Indian: "Sandino era uno de esos hombres raros y primitivos, producto de un fecundo cruce de razas exóticas" (166). This combination incites women, especially the *gringa*, to seek him out.

Yo conocí a Sandino. Era un muchacho cruzado de hindostano y antillana. Tenía el cabello liso y negro. Sus rasgos eran del tipo caucásico; pero deformado por la imperceptible película de movimiento que siempre imprime la raza negra. Delgado, alto y muy elegante. (165-66)

This description enlightens the reader to the contradictions inherent in social protest literature and in literature that examines underrepresented populations such as blacks and

indigenous peoples. While the passage admires Sandino's height, physical stature, and appearance, it demeans his blackness. The reference to "deformado" creates a negative tone that stems from racial prejudice based on perceived biological and social inferiority. While Sandino's European features are accentuated ("cabello liso"), his blackness is viewed as a detriment to his physical appearance as well as to his character. The description inevitably values the white aesthetic and demeans and devalues the black one.

Sandino represents the various cultures that now characterize Panama. The United States presence brought such unwanted populations to the Isthmus as the West Indian. As a result, Panamanians struggled to deal with the West Indianness that is an integral part of Panamanian culture. The prejudice was not only racial, but also cultural as natives dealt with a country that culturally and linguistically approximated the Caribbean. Ramón discovers that he is unable to accept the *antillanidad* of a country that resembles the Caribbean instead of South America (206). He reaches the conclusion that, "Quizá estemos más cerca de las Antillas que de Colombia y de allí la confusión de nuestras almas" (266). In effect, he finds himself caught between two worlds, two cultures, and two languages. While he feels compelled to accept the *antillanidad* in Panamanian culture, he fears that this will signify a loss of *panameñidad* and, therefore, *hispanidad*.<sup>24</sup>

West Indians are repeatedly viewed as allies to North American interests, particularly since they share the language of the new colonizer. Ramón's friend, Rodrigo, expresses this distrust: "Millones de dólares, miles de antillanos que piensan y

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<sup>24</sup> One should bear in mind that in 1902, the overall population of Panama was 80,000 and by 1940, 13,000 Antilleans remained in the Canal Zone and 20,000 in the rest of the republic (Duncan *Teoría* 61). Therefore, by the early twentieth century, the West Indian population almost doubled that of the overall Panamanian population.

sienten con las ideas y los sentimientos de las revistas norteamericanas que leen” (240). Ramón concurs, asserting: “gringos [que] prefieren el jamaicano porque su lengua inglesa no sirve para contestar, que no para la protesta” (41). The West Indians’ success was attributed to their perceived submissiveness and indifference to racial inequities as illustrated in *Luna verde* (122). However, Panamanian West Indian writers demonstrate that this is not the case in their postcolonial works.

Moreover, *Luna verde* represents the inherent conflicts and contradictions of social protest literature. The novel tragically ends with the death of Ramón who fights against United States imperialism. Beleño recognizes that Ramón and other workers are victims of imperialism, but the text still demonstrates ambiguity towards new populations that have resulted from United States dominance. As Sandino and the *gringa* are repeatedly admired for their exoticism, and for their marginalized status in the case of Sandino, they are also viewed with contempt due to the cultural and economic changes that they brought with them.

### **Curundú and Religious Intolerance in the Canal Zone**

While *Luna verde* deals with the cultural and economic impact of neo-imperialism, *Curundú* looks closely at the religious differences between Rubén Galván and Salvador Brown. That is, the novel explores religious differences between the Afro-Hispanic and Afro-West Indian populations. The negative comments about the Afro-Antillean population in *Curundú* most often refer to the population's religious convictions. For example, the narrator compares a line to the prayers of a West Indian: “la fila es larga como la reverencia de un antillano viejo” (12). This commentary undoubtedly results from the religious convictions of the West Indian population and its

belief in Protestantism instead of Catholicism. However, it is the protagonist's relationship with West Indian Salvador Brown that proves to be most problematic.

Rubén Galván and Salvador Brown meet coincidentally when signing up to work in the Canal Zone. Rubén and Salvador contrast spiritually, physically, racially, and culturally. When describing himself, Rubén Galván proudly writes that he is “moreno” and not *negro* or black (19). As Mario Andino observes: “Rubén Galván vive una contradicción: es oscuro, moreno, sin llegar a ser ‘negro’” (86). Rubén Galván “[d]esde muy niño había aprendido que los chombos y los manutos le quitan los trabajos a la gente como a su papá que tienen que trabajar en construcción” (221).<sup>25</sup> Rubén has problems with all blacks stemming from his paternal grandmother’s prejudices. His grandmother, who had always prided herself on being Hispanic, hated her son for marrying a black woman, a *morena* from Portobelo (80). As opposed to Rubén, Salvador is “moreno, azafranado, cabeza amplia, rasurada al rapé y boca redonda y sensual” (23).

Although Beleño describes Salvador as *moreno*, he notes physical distinctions that identify the protagonist more with his African roots than with his Spanish or European heritage. His “boca redonda y sensual,” a characteristic of African descendants, distinguishes him from Rubén’s more European features, even though the latter may be just as dark. West Indian Salvador Brown is portrayed as a religious zealot and is derogatorily referred to as “Kid Salva Cuatro,” a pejorative term used to designate all Christians who are not Catholic (25). Appropriately named Salvador or “Saviour,” the West Indian is repeatedly characterized as a religious fanatic who is not in touch with the social reality of the Canal Zone.

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<sup>25</sup> *Manutos* are *campesinos* or countrymen.

The religious dialogue between Salvador and Rubén demystifies some of the prejudices that both groups harbor against each other's religion. When speaking to Rubén and a group of workers, Salvador reminds the group that: “En nombre de tu bonita religión católica, mataron a los indios y trajeron a los negros para esclavizarlos...” (191). But Rubén reminds Salvador of the racial and ecclesiastical segregation in the United States churches that prevent blacks and whites from worshiping together (192). Lobo Guerrero retorts: “Mentira, ustedes no creen en Cristo, sólo los católicos creemos en Cristo, en la virgen y en sus iglesias... ¿Dónde has visto tú, alguna vez en tu vida, una iglesia protestante mejor que una iglesia católica?” (187). The characters' youth and lack of knowledge of other cultures and religions lead them to such narrow conclusions. Beleño opposes the myths and religious intolerance between both groups and attempts to generate discussion between them.

Although Beleño succeeds in exposing the myths that both groups have about each other's religion, he fails in his analysis by portraying Salvador as a marginalized and flawed character. In addition, in his contrast between Rubén and Salvador, Beleño often exaggerates the latter's religious convictions. For example, Brown is such a religious zealot, that he relates learning English to learning about God (148). Even as Rubén searches to find true meaning in religion, he ends by returning to Catholicism, the national religion of Panama. Salvador, no doubt, will continue trying to convert others to Protestantism, a religion that Panamanians associate with West Indians and United States foreign invaders of the Isthmus.

*Anti-West Indian Sentiment*

Protestantism in opposition to Catholicism contributed to the anti-West Indian sentiment in Panama. Religion, however, was not the only divisive factor that caused hatred towards the group. The Afro-Antillean who migrated from the British West Indies to work on the North American Canal could speak English and often received preferential jobs and treatment in the Zone (Biesanz “Cultural” 773). Thus, West Indians were viewed as outsiders by Panamanians. The new Panamanian of West Indian descent who emerges in Beleño’s works is one of mixed heritage, half-West Indian and half-North American, but not yet Panamanian. These characters are in search of their identity and fight to be recognized as *gringos*. *Curundú’s* Red Box is a *gringo-chombo*, but he imagines himself as something different (167). Born to a North American father and a West Indian mother in Panama, Red Box strives to prove his whiteness in a Zone that classifies anyone of color as black, regardless of skin tone. More disturbingly, Red Box sees nothing but his whiteness and disdains everything associated with black people.

According to the text:

Quizás por eso no gustaba de ver su rostro en un espejo porque su faz rubicunda, esmaltada de pecas, no se conformaba armoniosamente lo que él mismo se imaginaba ser. Sus rasgos negroides, pronunciadamente belicosa su porte rubicundo, siempre le ofendieron de la misma manera que sus apretados cabellos duros; duros y rojizos que él acariciaba inútilmente, con un movimiento nervioso de sus manos, en un afán, de ondularlos con su contemplación. (167-68)

Red Box’s self-image fails to correspond to what he imagines it to be, and his self-hatred reminds us of Fanon's assertion that the negro who is a victim of colonization

"[...]is overwhelmed to such a degree by the wish to be white, it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex<sup>26</sup>" (100). Red Box's self-image is challenged when he tries to enter a church for whites only, in order to clean up after the incident (199, 206).

Red Box refuses to see himself for who he really is, and the priest does not allow him to enter the church because "no lo miran a usted como blanco..." (206). Red Box attempts to assert his authority as a foreman, which he believes he deserves, not only because of his position in the Canal Zone, but also due to his Anglo American roots. Furious over not receiving a cold glass of water, he berates his subordinate Julio Quintano for not responding to him with such phrases as "Yes Sir" or "No Sir."<sup>27</sup> Red Box responds to Quintano's lack of respect and obliviousness to Red's status as a *gringo* by venting: "I am an American citizen...My name, Red...Red Box The Killer...and you...negars (en inglés). Por eso tienen que obedecerme. Yo soy gringo" (174). Red Box does not recognize that he too is a *chombo* or a "negar" ("nigger") in the eyes of White Americans and to some Panamanians as well. Again, it is useful at this point to return to Fanon who argued that racial oppression often made blacks turn against themselves and appropriate the racial discourse of the colonizer (192). In effect, the black utilizes the discourse of the colonizer against his own people, and by extension,

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<sup>26</sup> In this respect, Red Box evokes the West Indian Charles McForbes, a character in the Afro-Costa Rican Quince Duncan's *Los cuatro espejos* (1973), who is in search of his identity and whose mirror image does not correspond to what he imagines it to be. Like Charles, Red Box refuses to acknowledge his blackness, but unlike him, he does not reconnect with his African roots.

<sup>27</sup> During the Jim Crow era, blacks in the United States had to address whites using the word "Sir" to demonstrate the proper respect due to a white man because of the latter's superiority to the black.

himself. While Red Box identifies others as *chombos*, he refuses to see himself as one of them.

After receiving his paycheck, Red Box decides that he wants to celebrate in a whites-only bar, the “Clubhouse de Balboa.” When Rubén and others warn him not to go, he ignores them thinking that he will be allowed to enter because he is a *gringo*. When he enters the bar, a black West Indian waitress refuses to seat him for fear of reprisal from the other patrons; Rubén becomes enraged and gets into a fight with the white patrons. As a result, he, Rubén, and Tamtam are fined for that week’s earnings.

### ***Anti-West Indian Sentiment and Language***

*Curundú* not only explores religious and cultural tensions between Afro-Hispanics and Afro-Antilleans, it also examines the linguistic distinctions that separate them. Language is a fundamental part of this trilogy and is especially examined in *Curundú*. While the characters often express disdain for West Indians because of their ability to speak English, they secretly admire them and wish they too could communicate in the language of the new colonizer (Beleño *Curundú* 147). In addition, Beleño makes a concerted effort to reproduce the English dialects (English-based Creole and North American English) in the Canal Zone.<sup>28</sup> One of the innovations of Beleño’s texts is the reproduction of West Indian speech produced by first generation West Indian characters

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<sup>28</sup> Throughout this study, English-based Creole and English will be used interchangeably to identify the language spoken by the West Indian population. However, it is important to recognize that the English referred to is an English-based Creole. In *Dictionary of Panamanian English*, Leticia C. Thomas Brereton acknowledges: “The language spoken by the Caribbean people who immigrated to Panama, their descendants and by others who have learned it from them is an English-based Creole. Creoles are languages with multi-lingual roots and are primarily lexified by one language but show influences of one or more other languages in their lexicon, syntax and phonology. Throughout the city of Panama the language of Antillean Panamanians is commonly known as English” (v-vi).

as well as the Panamanians who attempt to speak English as laborers. Many of the terms are glossed at the end of the texts or included in footnotes. For example, the phrase “múfander” is the Spanish pronunciation of the English phrase “move from there” (123). Beleño transcribes the language of the Canal Zone, which is what the narrator describes as an “unharmonious mixture” of Spanish and English (136). The following language exchange between two West Indian Canal Zone workers, Tamtam and Liequí, demonstrates Beleño’s ability to reproduce the effect of migration and linguistic hybridity in Panama. As the narrator acknowledges, the language of Tamtam and Liequí is, “un nuevo idioma, hasta cierto punto, mezcla y aleación de inglés y castellano” (135).

Tamtam begins:

- Tú ve Liequí, el vacilón es así, spar...¡El vacilón!  
Si tu te pones tof, tú te encuentras tu mama y  
tu papá en la calle. Y esa boai! Tu sae bien a nosotros no  
guta vacilá aquí...y ram, ahuecamo pa onde otro pedazo  
de gallina que le guste el vacilón. ¿Tú ve el vacilón...?  
(Liequí afirma en silencio). (135-36)

The language exchange between Tamtam and Liequí demonstrates the linguistic hybridity inherent on the Isthmus that is representative of the cultural differences that typify hybrid cultures. Despite Panama’s resistance to change and unwillingness to accept West Indians as a legitimate part of their country, these changes have already taken place linguistically. The dialogue is composed of *panameñismos*, words that are characteristic of Panamanian speech such as “vacilón” (joke) and West Indian speech such as “spar” and “tof” (Padrón 18). Realizing that the reader will not understand

certain words, Beleño glosses the terms "spar" and "tof" which he translates respectively as "friend" and "tough." This exchange stems from Beleño's personal experiences growing up with West Indians in Santa Ana and as a Canal Zone worker in Clayton. However, as Ian Smart notes, Beleño's understanding of West Indian culture and language is limited. While he recognizes that "spar" is not Panamanian and resembles the English word "spark" and is used contextually to mean "friend," he does not realize that it comes directly from Jamaican Creole and is derived from the expression "sparring partner" (*Central American* 37, 127). Like other well-intentioned Panamanians during this period, Beleño is an outsider to the West Indian culture.

Be that as it may, the important point to make here is that Beleño reproduces the linguistic transformation, and West Indians are viewed as outsiders who have corrupted the Spanish language. As a result, they are further marginalized which contributes to their image as intruders who are incapable or unwilling to assimilate into Panamanian society. After the interchange between Tamtam and Liequí, the narrator of *Curundú* reflects on the cultural significance that these new people and their language bring to the country: "Era la Mosca de Oro de la corrupción que transitaba desde el bajo fondo de una antillanidad envilecida y de un yanquismo degenerante del idioma que ascendía corrompiendo las formas de expresión" (139). West Indian speech, just as the population itself, is viewed contradictorily. They are admired for their exoticism and as an economic asset to the country, yet they are also viewed with disdain for the cultural, racial, and linguistic implications that they have on the Isthmus.

**Gamboa Road Gang and the Double Consciousness of Atá**

Like *Curundú*, *Gamboa Road Gang* examines racial conflicts between West Indians and Panamanians. The introduction to *Gamboa* confirms the novel's anti-imperialistic sentiment when the narrator-protagonist says: "Los yanquis siguen explotando, a costa nuestra y del mundo entero, la industria canalera y nuestra estratégica posición mundial, a nombre del mito de la Democracia" (81). Similar to Don Porfirio, the narrator reinforces that Panama was exploited because of its geographic location. The most overt denouncement of United States imperialism can be seen when *Gamboa's* narrator compares the Canal Zone to a *latifundio* which he describes as "un latifundio vital y estratégico de los Estados Unidos en la América Latina" (81). His *latifundio* is the Canal Zone and the *terratenedientes* are represented by the United States government.

Coupled with the anger against the United States was the Panamanians' distrust of the West Indian population; Panamanians viewed West Indians as new citizens of the country who were not totally committed to the national project. *Gamboa's* Nicanor Miranda suggests: "Ustedes son panameños cuando les conviene y cuando no, ingleses" (149). Panamanians wanted the West Indian population to give up their cultural ties and patriotic allegiances to their homeland. The Afro-Panamanian critic Juan Materno Vásquez reinforces this sentiment with the following comment: "Conviven con los zonianos, un importante grupo nacional, los antillanos, de piel oscura, costumbres raras de idioma inglés, para quienes Panamá aún sólo es la tierra que pisan" (131).

Although *Gamboa* attempts to expose discriminatory practices against Panamanians as well as West Indians, it often ends up contributing to the very same racial stereotypes that it intends to condemn. In fact, Beleño was criticized for his novels'

derogatory remarks against West Indians. The Panamanian West Indian writer, Carlos Guillermo Wilson (discussed in chapter four), as well as the Panamanian writer Justo Arroyo, have both noted the anti-West Indian sentiment in Beleño's works (Birmingham-Pokorny "Interview" 16; Arroyo 158). For example, when describing Nelly's children, the narrator compares their blackness with "cordones eléctricos" (55). This statement objectifies their blackness and does not possess racial sensitivities. Also, when describing the homes in a West Indian neighborhood, *Gamboa's* narrator states that contrary to what one may believe, the neighborhood is clean. According to the text:

Contrario a lo que pueda pensar de un barrio de antillanos, los patios son muy limpios y los cuartos amueblados con estimulante invitación orden y al buen gusto inglés. La gente se baña diariamente, aunque a veces se bañen con agua de muertos, rito antihigiénico que suele practicarse cuando muere algún vecino. Pero eso es para tener buena suerte. En todas partes la gente bacea en la regadera, se limpia los dientes y huele a ser humano higienizado. (54)

Notwithstanding Beleño's attempts to dispel myths about the Afro-Antillean population, his discussion results in a reinforcing of these very stereotypes. Beleño's description is telegraphic and lacks an insider's perspective, that is, from within the West Indian culture. He reflects the racist stereotypes of the national imaginary and echoes the Panamanian national rhetoric. His tone is negative and it is evident that he is an outsider to the population when viewing their bathing rituals as superstitious instead of as a vital part of their culture. It is no surprise, then, that Carlos Wilson cites this passage as one that infuriates him the most because it demeans the Afro-Antillean population (Birmingham-Pokorny "Interview" 16-17).

Beleño's texts make disparaging remarks that had been typically ascribed to blacks in the literature of the nineteenth century as well as that of the *negrista* period. Blacks are continuously described uniformly as sensual and sexual beings who dance. Annabelle Rodney, the alleged rape victim of *Gamboa's* Atá, wrote a thesis entitled, "La contribución folklórica del negro americano en la cultura de los Estados Unidos," and observes that for whites in both Panama and the United States, blacks epitomize the anthropological (151). Annabelle's thesis supports the notion that her relationship with Atá was superficial and cultivated by curiosity and folkloric interest. In *Gamboa*, inmate August Mildred affirms: "La mujer blanca que está tocada por un negro, nunca se olvida de él" (173). This remark points to sexual myths ascribed to black men as well as the attraction of white women to them. As Fanon commented some time ago: "A white woman who has had a Negro lover finds it difficult to return to white men" (171).

The idea of a relationship between a black man and a white woman leads the narrator to ponder the motives of Annabelle's interest in Atá. He alludes to this when referring to the possible existence of a relationship between Annabelle and Atá: "¿Sería cierta la existencia de una ciudadana norteamericana, cuyos horribles dolores de cabeza no tienen explicación científica a menos que no sea la noción errada de un extravío sexual, realizado plenamente al influjo del alcohol carnavalesco y el calypso nocturnal?" (114). This stereotype echoes the characterization of Elena Cunha in Sinán's *Plenilunio*. Not only are white women sexually promiscuous, but their relationship with a black man can only be explained by the influence of outside factors such as alcohol in a dim setting. At night, influenced by alcohol and the West Indian calypsos, the *gringa* has no control over her behavior, and her actions are dismissed as sexual whims. In addition, blacks

symbolize the biological for whites. Both the narrator and the inmate (August Mildred) reduce the relationship between Annabelle and Atá to a sexual adventure based on Annabelle's sexual curiosity simply because Atá is black.

Despite Beleño's diatribe against white women, he is outraged by the negative perception that United States soldiers have towards Panamanian women. The soldiers view black women as sexual objects. The narrator of *Gamboia* admonishes the soldiers for these negative perceptions: "Para un gringo, pensé, una mujer chomba o una mujer panameña es sólo un artefacto un poco raro saciarse. Luego le hace un hijo y se larga del país" (26). Ironically, the protagonists do not question the desires of Panamanians to be with white women, yet evoke a sense of hatred when it comes to the sexual violation of Panamanian women. An example of this sexual violation includes the rape of Perla, Atá's girlfriend, who is gang raped by Bobby Rodney (Annabelle's brother) and his friends who are seeking a black woman to avenge Annabelle's rape. The description of Perla's rape and its aftermath is one of Beleño's most poignant and artistic representations of Zonian crime and violence. Reproduced here in its entirety, the passage demonstrates violence as well as racial and gender inequities in the Canal Zone.

El cuerpo doliente y ardiendo en sus muslos. Las muñecas, los brazos y los pies, amoratados. Las uñas blancas se dibujaron clavadas en su carne barbadiense, color de té. La boca rota y la cara arañada. Como fue arrastrada sobre el llano, su traje de dacrón quedó entre zarzas y cadillos. Sus interiores rasgados por manos rubias que tiraron de ella igual que si arrancasen pellejos de una res muerta. A su pelo aplanchado estaban adheridas briznas secas del camino. Apestaba a gringos borrachos. Y le dolía el sexo por dentro. Cayeron ondulando

sobre ella como buitres blancos sobre la morrina. Apretaron sus senos hasta arrancarle gritos de dolor en su larga pesadilla. Había muerto y muerto bajo los machos de manos rudas que corcovearon sobre su cuerpo de calipso. Entonces la dejaron abandonada...Y sobre su cuerpo helado, roto y pegajoso descendieron los mosquitos...La retreta de los mosquitos zumbó sobre su cuerpo exánime. Había perdido el conocimiento. Se defendió hasta lo último. Pero sucumbió rebelde y se entregó a la tierra. Los gringos cayeron sobre su cuerpo mientras tuvo fuerzas. Le cayeron encima, unos sosteniéndole las manos y otros los pies, como los condenados a descuartizamiento. Ella se rebeló y pateó, enardeciendo más a Bobby...Cuando abrió los ojos había salido el sol y todo hallábase bajo la penumbra sombreada de la mañana. Estaba desnuda, inmóvil. (132-33)

Like the corpse of an animal, Perla's body is accosted by mosquitos. Raped and almost beaten to death, Perla is rescued by two other Panamanians and encouraged to go to the police. However, after a conversation about the social and racial inequities in the Canal Zone, she decides to return home and not report the incident. Perla's rescuer tells her, "Gamboa se hizo para los negros y no para los blancos...La justicia no se ha hecho en la Zona para los blancos sino para los negros" (137). Her rescuer's statements make it clear that even if Perla were to go to the police, this heinous crime would go unpunished because of racial inequities in the social justice system in the Canal Zone. In addition, Perla's gender prevents her from reporting the crime and underlines the double dilemma of a black female victim. Clearly, if Perla were white like Atá's alleged victim, she would not fear reporting the crime. As a black woman, she is doubly marginalized because of her race and gender and is unable to achieve justice.

*Atá's Double Consciousness*

Like *Curundú's* Red Box, *Gamboa's* Arthur Ryams exemplifies the new Panamanian. Atá is a *mestizo*-born to a mother from Barbados and a North American father (Beleño *Gamboa* 67). Although he represents the “1<sup>st</sup> generation of children born to West Indian immigrants and blends elements of the West Indies, the United States, and Panama,” it is his *chombo* heritage that proves to be problematic in the Zone (Conniff 68). Atá is described as: “un muchacho de cabellos rojos y atrasados, de piel rubicunda y manchada de pecas. La primera impresión es la de un negro albino, pero observándolo con familiaridad se descubre enseguida que su madre es una legítima negra y su padre, un sajón de pura cepa” (Beleño *Gamboa* 43). However, Atá is simply black to the other prisoners. Perhaps as a reflection of the United States perception of race, his prison mate, Franklin Delano Owen notes: “Todo el que tenga madre negra, es negro, aunque sea gringo” (43). However, Atá is also a “gringo-chombo, chombo-bruto..gringo-pobre, chombo mallulón y chombo-blanco,” who wishes to be only *gringo* (67). Atá attempts to *blanquearse* by straightening his hair daily with Pomada Cuba and by having a relationship with a white woman, Annabelle, because “una gringa vale cien años” (42). From his viewpoint, he deserves to be with Annabelle because “[e]lla (Annabelle) es gringa y yo también soy gringo” (41).

Atá refuses to accept his West Indian heritage and demeans the other Afro-Antillean inmates just as other Panamanians and North Americans did before him. Speaking of the West Indian inmate Wallai, Atá exclaims: “¡Ponlo en su lugar! Ninguno de estos chombos son gente. Yo los conozco. En su casa comen como puercos, con la mano. Aquí es donde vienen a ser gente y a comer con tenedor y cuchillo” (22). Atá's

own self-image is distorted to the extent that he does not recognize himself as a member of this group that he so vehemently abhors. Furthermore, he has appropriated and internalized the national discourse that views West Indians as second class citizens. Because of his self-hatred, Atá is despised by other West Indian prisoners. Wallai, a West Indian who obviously views Atá as a traitor to his own race, mocks his attempt to be white and to distinguish himself from other prisoners because he received a fifty-year sentence for having been with a “blue-eyed queen.” The message of Wallai’s mockery is evident. Atá has alienated himself from his West Indian ancestry and does not know his true identity. In prison, Atá comes to this self-realization, and finally identifies himself as black.

In prison, Atá distances himself from the other black prisoners and demeans them because they remind him of his blackness. Having internalized the racism, the black becomes negrophobic and turns against himself and other blacks (Fanon 190-195). Atá has internalized this inferiority complex and evokes a self-hatred and self-loathing due to the colonizer’s image of him. Like Red Box, Atá reflects Fanon's notion of a black inferiority complex: “Since in all periods the Negro has been an inferior, he attempts to react with a superiority complex...It is because the Negro belongs to an inferior race that he seeks to be like the superior race” (213, 215). Atá is a victim because society has made him inferior and left him with no other option than to abhor his blackness and seek status as a white man.

Within the confines of the Canal Zone, the only thing that matters is Atá's blackness or whiteness. There is no room to be either Panamanian or West Indian. Although it may seem to be a simplification to classify the problem of Atá's identity by

utilizing the binary black-white paradigm (i.e., West Indian/Anglo-American), he does not strive to be Panamanian or West Indian. Only Atá's Anglo-American ancestry and ability to pass or to be recognized as a *gringo* is valued. Atá emphasizes the *chombo-gringo*'s marginal status:

Los amigos míos que son negros no son panameños, porque ustedes no los quieren y los desprecian. No son gringos, porque aquí en la Zona no los aceptan. No son ingleses, porque la nacionalidad de sus padres no significa nada para ellos. Somos judíos. No tenemos patria. Somos lo que somos: gente que respiramos. Por eso yo quiero ser alguien. Quiero ser gringo. Soy negro. Soy gringo. Tú ves mi piel...(147)

Clearly, Beleño demonstrates the effect that migration and displacement have on an individual through the figure of Atá. As Ian Smart notes in *Central American Writers of West Indian Origin*:

His [Atá] chombo blood inspires in him too a psychotic hatred for the only group that is willing and eager to accept him. This hatred is symptomatic of a presumed *chombo* inferiority and an equally unscientifically posited Yankee superiority. Like all of Beleño's *chombos*, he tends to be servile, and this is reinforced in his case by an absolute contempt for himself and his people. (18)

Beleño identifies the ramifications of this polarized racial system by relating the historical account of Lester León Greaves through the problematic character of Atá. Throughout the novel, Atá receives letters from Annabelle and secretly hopes that she will prove his innocence by going to the Zonian police. After receiving Annabelle's last letter and discovering through the Zonian newspaper that she plans to wed, Atá finally

realizes that Annabelle will never tell the truth, and more importantly, that his dream of liberation has come to an end. When she marries a Captain in the United States, his hopes are destroyed and he basically commits suicide by attempting to escape from prison. The prison guards have no other choice but to kill him when he crosses the line.

Annabelle was not only “un símbolo de su libertad,” but a symbol of his desire to become a *gringo* (119). His relationship with her (re)affirmed his status as a *gringo* because a white woman would never date a black man. Unable to deal with this realization, and still disillusioned about his identity, Atá yells while escaping: “Yo soy Atá. Yo soy blanco. Yo soy gringo...Yo tengo un padre rubio y una novia azucena” (170). Ironically, it is when Atá is close to committing suicide that he acknowledges for the first time that he is black, privately telling the narrator: “Annabelle y yo somos dos líneas paralelas. Negro y blanco” (139). The two parallel lines, one black and the other white, is a metaphor for the relationship between Atá and Annabelle. Like these two lines, they will never complete their union. Eventually, Atá is unable to deal with the reality of his blackness and escapes society’s racism by fleeing to his death.

The conflict of *Gamboa’s* Atá and of *Curundú’s* Red Box, both of North American and Anglophone Caribbean ancestry, evokes the African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness. It is worthwhile to return to Du Bois’s seminal essay *The Souls of Black Folk* written in 1903, where he describes the problem of the twentieth century as that of the color line. He states:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an

American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (5)

*Gamboa's* Atá and *Curundú's* Red Box are also plagued by this twoness, which has led them to deny their negritude in hope of acceptance and social status. They do not know how to simultaneously embrace their West Indian and North American roots because society only values their whiteness. Thus, in the Canal Zone, they are both *gringo* and *chombo* searching for an identity. Ashamed of their West Indian heritage, they seek status as *gringos*. This generation of West Indians, the first generation to be born on the Isthmus, has not yet begun to accept or explore their *panameñidad*. Due to racial tensions on the Isthmus, caused by problems stemming from the colonial period as well as those brought by the United States, they struggle primarily as black subjects in a world that values whiteness. This is not unlike the future generations who still struggle with this racial paradigm; however the generation of Atá and Red Box has only begun to explore one facet of it.

*Gamboa Road Gang* is one of the most studied Panamanian novels inside and outside of the Isthmus because “for the first time a Panamanian author successfully portrays a man (Atá) struggling with himself and with his environment to belong to a human and social group which rejects him” (Smart *Central American* 13). Atá represents a contradiction. He is a *chombo-gringo*, and as a result, “tiene patria y no tiene patria” (Beleño *Gamboa* 26). The struggle does not end with Atá; his girlfriend Perla has just given birth to another child, ironically fathered by her white rapist, Bobby. As Beleño

warns us of the cyclical nature of history, the baby will inevitably be “otro Atá, soñando con otra Annabelle” (162).

The Canal Zone is a meeting place, a geographical point of union and disunion that symbolizes the conjunction and disjunction of various cultures and ethnicities. The Canal Zone trilogy is a metaphor for the cultural, racial, and linguistic plurality that characterized Panama during this era and continues to characterize the Isthmus. These various characters represent Panama's cultural plurality characterized by people of African, indigenous, and Hispanic descent. This plurality is most apparent in *Gamboa Road Gang* where the characters from diverse backgrounds unite in prison, a place similar to the Canal Zone that symbolizes an imposed order. Each of these characters strives to obtain an identity but fails. In turn, the Canal Zone is a reflection of this plurality as a place of transit where various cultures, countries, and peoples constantly intersect and encounter. It is also a contradiction that represents economic promise and hope as well as geographical exploitation and (neo)imperialism. While it gave Panama economic independence, it also subordinated the country to a hegemonic regime that further transformed the national foundation of the Isthmus.

### ***Conclusions***

The Canal Zone symbolizes the cultural, linguistic, and racial conflicts inherent in Panamanian society. The lives of the protagonists in the aforementioned trilogy end in destruction caused by internal and external conflicts, those of Panama and the United States. Long before the United States began construction of the Canal in 1904 and assumed occupation of the Zone, there were racial problems in Panama. However, the United States presence exacerbated these racial problems by imposing a polarized racial

construction on Panama that resembled the racial paradigm of the Southern United States. In effect, the Canal Zone has emerged as a microcosm of Panama where racial conflicts and tensions affect relationships among Anglo-Americans and Panamanians, West Indians, Afro-Hispanics, *latinos*, and indigenous communities.

The Canal Zone trilogy chronicles the personal quests of Ramón de Roquebert, Rubén Galván, and Arthur Ryams (Atá) who all perish tragically while struggling to find the meaning of life and their place in early twentieth-century Panama. Despite other Panamanian literary critics' and writers' views of the significance of the Canal, and by extension, Panama's non-white populations, Beleño created a space for his characters (Rubén, Ramón and Atá) who constitute an integral part of Panamanian culture. Beleño portrays "brown" Panama, and for this reason, the notable Panamanian literary critic Rodrigo Miró has criticized his characters as being of "discutible panameñidad" (*La literatura panameña* 193). Miró was obviously referring to the recent immigrants, the West Indian "diggers," who to him did not symbolize *panameñidad*. For him, the Canal Zone was "una parte mínima de la realidad de Panamá" (193). Miró reflects the early twentieth-century Panamanian rhetoric that focused on Panama's Spanish roots, which for him and others was not reflected in Colón and Panama City, two cities with a large number of immigrants and Afro-Hispanics. Rather, *panameñidad* was symbolized by a white minority of elites, and the Canal Zone revealed the darker populations of the Isthmus that did not fit into the country's homogeneous image. For this reason, Beleño's texts are more relevant because they lift the veil of populations who up until this period were either denigrated and/or unexplored in Panamanian literature.

Beleño's novels succeed in presenting the effects of racial discrimination in the neocolonial and neoimperialist regime imposed by the United States. They also succeed in presenting the plight of the *chombo*, even though these texts, most apparently *Gamboá*, often reduce the latter's plight to essentialisms that inadvertently marginalize the West Indian characters. Moreover, Beleño's works show the effect that racial discrimination and classification have had on the Panamanian *mestizo* as depicted in *Luna verde* and *Curundú*. *Luna verde* sees the hope in the *mestizo* as part of the solution to United States imperialism: "Serán los mulatos y mestizos enrubecidos que seguirán combinando esta ciudad que ya no tiene colores, sino un color: el del futuro" (185). Beleño's focus on the *mestizo*, *moreno*, and *mulato* illuminates once again the question of his own racial identity, and reminds us how he was affected emotionally by the racial system that relegated non-black Panamanians to the category of *negro*. Beleño views discrimination as a by-product of the Canal Zone, but fails to recognize how Panamanians of non-West Indian descent were affected by the country's own racial problems and stigmas stemming from centuries of *mestizaje* as well as the national rhetoric that resulted from it. In effect, Beleño has internalized the racism, the discourse of *mestizaje*, and assimilation, and therefore, does not see himself as a proponent of this racist discourse. His works constantly emphasize that Panamanians were not the problem; rather he reinforces the notion that the United States was the problem. That is to say, while his trilogy protests racial discrimination, it does not view the racism perpetuated by Panamanians against West Indians as part of the problem. Indeed, the West Indian is portrayed as a conflicted character and is viewed as an outsider by Afro-Hispanics and other Panamanians.

Panamanian racism reflects the neocolonial regime and not the problems that stemmed from the colonial period. Beleño's trilogy and presentation of the West Indian, and his initiation of the Afro-Hispanic/Afro-Antillean polemic, prefigure the writings of contemporary Panamanian West Indian writers on the Isthmus, which will be explored in the remaining chapters. As will become evident, Beleño's characterization has been discussed and challenged by new writers of African and West Indian descent.

## Chapter four

### The Afro-Caribbean Works of Carlos "Cubena" Guillermo Wilson and his (Re)

#### Vision of Panamanian History

"Escribo para dejar constancia del aporte de los africanos y sus descendientes latinoamericanos a las historias, las culturas y a las identidades en las Américas, porque en los textos oficiales brillan por su ausencia."  
Carlos Guillermo Wilson<sup>29</sup>

During the 1950s, as the Isthmus of Panama experienced an economic decline, fewer laborers were needed in the Canal Zone. In fact, as the demand for labor weakened, the Panamanian oligarchy sought ways to rid the country of the West Indian population. One must bear in mind that because Panamanians grew tired of the cultural, linguistic, and economic dominance of the West Indians in the Canal Zone, West Indian laborers were expelled from the Canal Zone to allow more Panamanians to obtain jobs (Priestley "Etnia" 40). Also, even though the 1955 Remón-Eisenhower treaty ended the dual pay system (Gold Roll/Silver Roll) for workers in the Canal Zone, it too resulted in the expulsion of many West Indian and Panamanian workers. However, the Remón-Eisenhower Treaty disproportionately affected West Indians, a population whose economic, political, and familial base was tied to the Canal Zone. Thus, many Silver Roll West Indian workers repatriated to their British and French homelands while others migrated to the United States in search of better opportunities (Edison 279; Barrow *Piel oscura* 212).

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<sup>29</sup> Seales Soley, LaVerne Marie. "Entrevista con Carlos Guillermo Cubena Wilson." *Afro Hispanic Review* (1998): 68.

***National Project of Assimilation (1940-1960)***

Before West Indians repatriated to the Caribbean, the Panamanian oligarchy promoted assimilation or “the absorption of an individual or a people into another culture” and encouraged West Indians to give up their linguistic and cultural ties to their respective Caribbean countries (Morner 5). Although Law 13 (1926) and Law 26 (1941) prevented West Indians from entering the country and made citizenship contingent on speaking Spanish, West Indians finally achieved full citizenship in 1946 under the new Constitution (Herzfeld 151). However, as Law 26 had previously mandated in 1941, the 1946 Constitution promoted cultural assimilation since many feared that Anglophone West Indian's Protestant religion and native English language would alter the official racial, linguistic, and cultural paradigm in Panama.

Clearly, West Indians posed a triple threat to the nation because of their racial, religious, and linguistic differences. Therefore, many West Indian leaders believed that the success of the West Indian in Panama rested solely on his/her ability to assimilate and adopt the major tenets of Panamanian nationality: language, culture, and religion. The prominent Panamanian West Indian journalist, sociologist, and diplomat George Washington Westerman (1910-1988), for example, encouraged West Indians to assimilate in order to succeed, and he celebrated the Afro-Antillean's intellect and economic contributions to the Isthmus. Westerman encouraged West Indians to obtain an education, and called attention to unfair practices in the Canal Zone as evidenced in his works: *Un grupo minoritario en Panamá* (1950), *The West Indian Worker on the Canal Zone* (1951), *Urban Housing in Panama and Some of its Problems* (1955), and *Los inmigrantes antillanos en Panamá* (1980). Much like the Civil Rights leaders of the

1950s and 1960s in the Southern United States, Westerman fought for equal access and fair treatment and sought ways to integrate the West Indian population into Panamanian society.

Panamanian West Indians identified with the Civil Rights Movement because of their marginalized situation in Panama, their ability to speak English, and because discrimination in the Canal Zone was based on a polarized racial system modeled after the United States. Like George Westerman, many other West Indian leaders in Panama were inspired by the Civil Rights Movement's quest for racial equality and its goal to integrate blacks into society. Not surprisingly, Westerman did not focus on cultural differences between West Indians and Panamanians; instead, he promoted West Indian assimilation. Despite Westerman's hopes for the West Indian population in Panama, the harsh reality was that Panamanians rejected the group not only because they spoke a different language, but because they were black.

Of course, Panamanian intellectuals had promoted the myth that West Indians posed a problem because of cultural distinctions instead of racial ones. After all, the Afro-Hispanic population was fully integrated and there were "no racial problems in Panama." Biesanz noted the cultural problem that West Indians posed to the nation. He wrote: "It is not simply visibility that marks out the 'chombos,' but biological visibility in combination with cultural differences, the chief of which is language" ("Cultural" 776). While West Indians were discriminated against because they were culturally different from Panamanians, Biesanz failed to recognize that the discrimination also stemmed from racial prejudice. That is, although Biesanz viewed racial discrimination exclusively as a cultural issue, the cultural differences created the impetus for Panamanians to racially

discriminate against West Indians. Biesanz's assertion was common. It was believed that colonial blacks' low economic status was due to class distinctions that were independent of racial problems, and that discrimination against West Indians stemmed from their cultural and national incompatibility (Barrow *Piel oscura* 187). Although he was an integrationist, Westerman did understand that the problem of the West Indian was principally one of color (*Un grupo* 26).

Other groups on the Isthmus, such as the Afro-Hispanics, adopted the discourse of cultural incompatibility and accepted a national paradigm defined strictly in terms of Spanish language, Hispanicism, and Catholicism. It is not coincidental that many Afro-Hispanics distanced themselves from Afro-Antilleans because, as discussed in the preceding chapters, they often identified themselves as *mulato* or *moreno*, categories that carried a weaker racial stigma than *negro*. As a result, Afro-Hispanics were able to conceal their blackness with their cultural compatibility because the "[h]ispanicity of the 'colonial blacks' tends to outweigh their blackness. Only the blacks of Anglophone Caribbean background are considered 'niggers' in the thoroughly negative sense of this term" (Smart "The West Indian Presence" 122). In effect, Panama's lack of acceptance of the group created a fragmented society which not only divided Panamanians against Afro-Antilleans, but also Afro-Panamanians against Afro-Antilleans.

Discrimination of the West Indian in the Canal Zone and throughout Panama gave rise to a literature that protested the unequal treatment of West Indians. While literature of the Canal Zone denounced the United States for imposing its binary racial hierarchy on the Isthmus and for discriminating against all Panamanians of color, including West Indians, contemporary literature has focused primarily on the discriminatory practices of

Panamanians against West Indians and aims to tell the unofficial story rarely documented in Panamanian textbooks. Joaquín Beleño Cedeño (1922-1988), whose works were analyzed in the previous chapter, was an example of one Panamanian writer who portrayed the United States as the enemy, yet failed to view Panamanians as contributors to racial discrimination against West Indians. Instead, he championed the causes of the *mestizo*, the *mulato*, and the *moreno* in opposition to Yankee imperialism. Unlike his predecessors, Beleño attempted to problematize the situation of the West Indian and especially the one of mixed racial heritage, that is, of Anglo-American and Caribbean descent. However, Beleño only possessed an outsider's perspective and failed to understand the complexities of race as experienced by Afro-Antilleans who were forced to negotiate an identity shaped by cultural, linguistic, and religious ties to Africa, the Caribbean, and Panama. He viewed West Indians outside of the African and Caribbean discourse and was unable to fully capture their experiences as new citizens in Panama.

Unlike Beleño, the Panamanian West Indian writer and critic Carlos Guillermo Wilson (1941) portrays the West Indian subculture in Panama from an insider's perspective, since he has experienced the prejudice as a member of this marginalized group. Consequently, he captures the complexities of race in Panama, and by extension of Latin America, while describing and relating the history of discrimination of the Panamanian West Indian population.

***Carlos “Cubena” Guillermo Wilson***

Born in Panama City in 1941, Carlos Guillermo Wilson is a third generation Panamanian West Indian who was denied citizenship because three of his grandparents were immigrants of African descent whose native language was not Spanish

(Birmingham-Pokorny "Interview" 18-19). Like many Panamanian West Indians who experienced economic exclusion, Wilson emigrated to the United States during the 1950s. In 1959, Wilson went to Mississippi and he relocated to California in 1964 where he enrolled in the graduate program in Spanish at the University of California at Los Angeles and obtained a Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy in Hispanic Languages and Literatures in 1970 and 1975. Wilson wrote his dissertation on Panamanian literature, and in the third chapter he traced the representation of blacks in Panamanian literature from the colonial period to the present. As early as the 1970s, then, Wilson demonstrated a concern for the literary representation of Afro-descendants in Panama.

It was Wilson's interest in his African heritage that compelled him to adopt the penname Cubena, the Hispanicized version of Kwabena, which is the Twi word for Tuesday in the Asante culture of Ghana. Born on a Tuesday, Wilson assumed the name Cubena because the Ashanti people of the Twi language have the custom of naming the male child according to the name of the day on which he is born. At the beginning of each of his literary works, the shield, "Escudo Cubena," appears containing a seven-link chain, seven stars, a bee on top of a turtle, and a book, all followed by an explanation of their significance. Wilson explains that the seven link chain represents the African cultures that were enslaved in the Americas; the seven stars represent regions where most Africans were enslaved, including Brazil, Cuba and Puerto Rico, Jamaica and Martinique, Panama, Perú and Ecuador, Dominican Republic and Haiti, and Venezuela and Colombia; the bee represents the chains, lashings, injustices and insults that Afro-descended populations have suffered since 1492; the turtle symbolizes the type of

character that Africans have developed during their odyssey throughout the Americas, and the book is a symbol of the principal tool used to combat mental slavery: education.

This shield is extremely important because it connects the author and his works to other displaced cultures of the African diaspora. Wilson does not limit his experiences of exile and displacement to the Caribbean or to Panama, and he understands that it is one shared by other diaspora figures who are victims of dispersion and fragmentation caused by (neo)colonialism. In other words, Wilson demonstrates a diaspora consciousness that characterizes “displaced peoples [who] feel (maintain, receive, invent) a connection with a prior home” (Clifford 310). Wilson’s identification with the diaspora resists Westerman’s assimilation thesis because he remains connected to not only his British homeland but also to Africa. Whether real or imaginary, his ties to Africa can be easily interpreted as anti-nationalist. However, while he resides in the United States, Wilson maintains his multiple allegiances to the Caribbean, Africa, and Panama.

Wilson’s focus on the diaspora has contributed to his broad reception as a writer and critic. Currently, he is the most widely studied Afro-Panamanian writer among literary scholars. However, most of these studies are done outside of his native homeland of Panama. To date, he has published five books, *Cuentos del negro Cubena: Pensamiento Afro-Panameño* (1977), *Pensamientos del negro Cubena: Pensamiento Afro-Panameño* (1977), *Chombo* (1981), *Los nietos de Felicidad Dolores* (1991), and *Los mosquitos de orixá Changó* (2002) as well as numerous articles on the African diaspora. Although his works are widely read within Afro-Hispanic literary circles in the United States, in Panama much of his work has been branded as anti-nationalist for exposing Panamanian racism and, as a result, it has been censored. Among the numerous articles,

dissertations, and manuscripts that have been written on Cubena, the scholarship of such Afro-Hispanic critics as Elba Birmingham-Pokorny, Richard Jackson, Ian I. Smart and Haakayoo Zoggyie, constitutes the most comprehensive analysis of his literary repertoire.<sup>30</sup>

In summary, these critics identify his texts as West Indian and compare them to other West Indian writers (Smart); they categorize his texts as Afro-Hispanic and analyze them in relation to other writers of the diaspora (Jackson, Zoggyie); they analyze the aspects of parody, humor, and satire in his works (Zoggyie); and they read his texts as novels of denouncement or social protest (Birmingham-Pokorny, Jackson). While all of these critics have analyzed important aspects of Cubena's works, they have not incorporated them into the Afro-Panamanian racial continuum, that is, within the context of Panamanian and Afro-Panamanian literature. Cubena's works respond and react to the cultural, historical, and linguistic specificities of the Isthmus and challenge the three tenets of *panameñidad* (language, culture, and religion) by lifting the veil of a discriminated population.

### ***Cubena and Joaquín Beleño C.***

Cubena's efforts to create a positive image of West Indians stem partly from the negative representations that have portrayed the group in Panamanian literature. I

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<sup>30</sup> Richard Jackson analyzed the elements of humanism in Cubena's works and categorized his poetry and short stories as social protest literature. Elba Birmingham-Pokorny examined his works as novels of denouncement and identifies the new Afro-Hispanic woman in his texts, noting that Wilson has changed the traditional image of the Afro-Hispanic woman by portraying her as a strong black woman. Ian I. Smart described Cubena's short stories as having elements of *tremendismo negrista*, a coined term by the Afro-Ecuadorian writer Adalberto Ortiz (1914) to describe the elements of the grotesque in Cubena's prose. Smart also characterized Cubena's novels as West Indian comparing them to other Hispanophone Caribbean writers such as Costa Rica's Quince Duncan (1940) and Panama's Gerardo Maloney (1945). Finally, Haakayoo Zoggyie has analyzed the elements of satire, humor and parody in Cubena's works.

discussed these representations in the previous chapter which analyzed Joaquín Beleño's Canal Zone trilogy (*Luna verde*, *Curundú*, and *Gamboa Road Gang*). Beleño, a champion of Panama's anti-imperialism crusade, vacillated in his characterization of West Indians presenting the marginalized group as both victim and victimizer. It is worth noting that Beleño's *Gamboa Road Gang* (1961) deeply disturbs Wilson since it is required reading in Panamanian schools. In the article, "The image of the chombitas in Joaquín Beleño's *Gamboa Road Gang*," Wilson summarizes five stereotypical images of West Indian women found in *Gamboa*. According to Wilson, women of African descent in *Gamboa* are portrayed as exotic, spiritually misguided, uncouth, negligent, and too Africanized ("Proceedings" 77). These negative representations anger Wilson and have inspired many of his works which highlight positive attributes of West Indians in Panamanian society. The following passage exemplifies Wilson's perspective on Beleño's characterizations of the West Indian population:

Joaquín Beleño has influenced me very much. Every time I read any of his trilogies, I become so angry because of the way he has portrayed "chombos"- Afro-Hispanics in his works. I am particularly angered by all the negative images and stereotypes he has presented in his works. As a result, I have tried to write and to present a more balanced and a more fair portrayal of "chombos" and Afro-Hispanics. (Birmingham-Pokorny "Interview" 16)

Wilson is also angered by Beleño's treatment of Afro-Hispanics. In the passage cited above, Wilson's interchangeable use of the terms Afro-Hispanic and *chombo* is quite evident. This usage illustrates that he considers Afro-Antilleans to be equally Panamanian and West Indian. Moreover, Wilson's use of both terms indicates that

*chombos*, or Afro-Antilleans, and Afro-Hispanics are more similar than different, which is one of the writer's principal messages in his works.

The different representations of the West Indian produced by Beleño and Wilson illustrate what the Afrocentric critic Molefe Asante defines as an *etic* and *emic* approach to criticism. According to Asante: "Etic approaches to criticism are those methods that are from outside the discourse perspective, whereas emic approaches view the perspective from within the same culture as the discourse" (188). It is precisely Beleño's outsider perspective that has led Ian Smart to classify his trilogy as a precursor to the West Indian literature of Panama's Wilson and Gerardo Maloney and Costa Ricas's Quince Duncan, and not as Central American West Indian literature, despite the numerous West Indian characters that populate his trilogy. Beleño's negative representations of West Indians illustrate the degree to which he internalized the discourse of *mestizaje* and Catholicism.

Contrary to Beleño, Wilson affirms a West Indian culture and heritage and aims to educate Panamanians about the contributions that West Indians have made and continue to make on the Isthmus. Instead of his works being anti-imperialistic or anti-West Indian, they are *pro-latino*, *pro-West Indian*, and *pro-afro-Panamanian*. Furthermore, Wilson recognizes the importance of his African heritage by connecting his works to the African diaspora. As Thomas Wayne Edison notes: "Both of Cubena's novels without a doubt display Afro-Antillean 'subcultures' in a more authentic light and reverse Beleño's perspective, thus re-defining the Antillean black population through his literature" (234).

Clearly, Beleño and Wilson expose discrimination from different perspectives. As a *mestizo*, Beleño is concerned primarily with denouncing the United States and revealing the country's ill treatment of the Panamanian of non-West Indian descent. However, Wilson argues that the United States is not the only enemy since Panamanians and Afro-Panamanians have equally discriminated against the West Indian population. In effect, Wilson champions this point of view in both his poetry and prose as he redefines the image and perception of the Panamanian West Indian. His texts elevate blackness above whiteness and, by extension, Afro-West Indianness above Panamanianness. Thus, because he reverses the invisibility of blackness and black-thought by presenting positive images of black West Indians, he also reverses the anti-West Indian sentiment prevalent in early twentieth-century Panamanian literature.

Because West Indians were denigrated and portrayed negatively in Panamanian literature, Wilson's primary objective has been to redeem the literary image of the West Indian who was excluded from the Panamanian nation-building project. Wilson is committed to telling the untold story, revising history, and changing the perception of the West Indian that has been presented in Panamanian literature. Thus, he challenges national myths propagated during early twentieth-century Panama by presenting the West Indian as the central protagonist, and, in turn, re-signifies the national myth of a Hispanic, Catholic, Spanish-speaking Panama. In short, Wilson's work is a call to recognize, or at least acknowledge, the Caribbeanness that now constitutes the Isthmus. Cubena's texts are a conscious effort to incorporate the Caribbean and the African Diaspora into Panamanian literature and to blend naturally elements of all three regions, that is, Africa, the West Indies, and Panama.

In the second and third chapters of this study, it was pointed out that the exemplary elements of early twentieth-century Panamanian literature (1900-1950) were descriptive exoticism, anti-imperialism, anti-West Indian sentiment and the emergence of the new Panamanian, the West Indian. Whether the texts of this period were written by Afro-Hispanics or Panamanians of non-African descent, the Afro-Antillean remained a subject examined outside Caribbean and African discourse. However, in the literature of Carlos Guillermo Wilson, and that of other contemporary Panamanian West Indian writers, the Afro-Antillean is no longer a subject who is vilified, exoticized, or analyzed by outsiders to the West Indian culture. In fact, Carlos Guillermo Wilson reverses this trend in Panamanian literature by protesting against injustices inflicted upon West Indians and by positioning the West Indian as a central figure in all of his works.

***From Social Protest to Afro-realism***

Carlos Guillermo Wilson's didactic emphasis and criticism of discrimination has led many to analyze the elements of social protest in his works. His works possess elements of social realism which flourished in Latin America during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Spanish American realism gave "the impression of representing, with as little distortion as possible, the realities of human life"(Lindstrom 34). Wilson's works represent the reality of the West Indian in Panama especially as it pertained to the injustices experienced in the Canal Zone. However, unlike Spanish American realism, or the social protest genre of the 1930s and 1940s, where many white and *mestizo* Latin American writers protested the injustices of minority groups including indigenous and African populations, Wilson writes as a West Indian. Furthermore, his works are not merely social protests but are informed by afrocentricism which analyzes

works from the perspective of being black. In fact, his works possess elements of "Afro-realism," a term coined by the contemporary Afro-Costa Rican writer Quince Duncan to describe the realities of Afro-Latin America from an insider's perspective:

Afro-realism has its roots in the African and Caribbean griot of oral tradition. Therefore, it is a sonorous cry. That is, it announces things with intense musicality...But it does not announce just anything. Afro-realism is the lived word, which means that it is based on experience. It is a construction and reconstruction of reality, without ceasing to be fiction, without losing the fantasy that makes us take delight in reading...On the other hand, Afro-realism carries within itself the ancestral word, everything that happened long ago and that still affects us. Those things that have traveled from mouth to mouth and that form our tradition, that which gives us an identity, that which legitimizes our survival. Through those twice-told stories we know that we are part of a fragmented community. Our culture was broken up by 500 years of oppression. Afro-realism announces and proclaims the tidbits of reality that we are left with, the remains of first covenants. But it is not limited to showing that the African consciousness is broken; instead it is preoccupied with rebuilding it. Therefore, Afro-realism is the dream of the reconstructed world. (cited in Martin-Ogunsola 16).

Although Cubena refuses to place his works in any particular literary category, an afro perspective is inherent in his novels, short stories, and poetry as he aims to reconstruct Afro-Caribbean communities within the socio-historical context of Panama. Of course, Afro-realism is not exemplary of all literature written by Afro-descended populations; rather, it prevails in those literatures that desire a restitution of black thought, culture, and

tradition. More importantly, according to Duncan, Afro-realism does not conform to a European mentality and possesses six key characteristics: it is not *negrista* literature; it is a restitution of an African voice; it revives African symbolic memory; it uses African historical memory based on research; it is a reaffirmation of ancestral community, and there is an effort to build an intra-narrative perspective, that is, an insider's perspective.

While Panamanian literature during the first half of the twentieth century aimed at restoring Panama's autochthonous Spanish roots and denounced the United States occupation of the Canal Zone, after the 1970s Panamanian literature was influenced by the signing of the 1977 Carter-Torrijos Treaty and the 1989 United States invasion of Panama to overthrow dictator Manuel Noriega.<sup>31</sup> Unlike the earlier literature, contemporary Panamanian literature is characterized by subversion of chronological order; fragmentation; experimentation with narrative structure; and a great number of symbolic elements, all of which characterized boom literature and/or the new Latin American narrative that emerged in the 1960s. Wilson's works possess many of these innovations including the replacement of the omniscient narrator with multiple narrators and *heteroglossia*, or the use of various types of speech. These stylistic innovations enrich the reading of Wilson's works as well as his denouncement of racism on the Isthmus.

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<sup>31</sup> In 1977, the Carter-Torrijos Treaty arranged for the return of the Panama Canal to Panama by December 31, 1999. Manuel Noriega is one of Panama's former military dictators who was accused by the United States government of drug-trafficking and selling United States secrets to Cuba. In 1988, the United States urged him to step down; when he refused the United States invaded Panama in 1989, captured Noriega, and sentenced him to forty years of prison.

***“Decolonization” through Education***

Unlike contemporary Latin American and Panamanian writers, Wilson is less subtle with his message and he aims to educate readers by revisiting Panamanian history and re-signifying it. In the epigraph to this chapter, Cubena reinforces the importance of education and the lack of information in Panama’s textbooks on the West Indian's contribution to the Isthmus. In addition, the book, which forms part of his shield, symbolizes education and knowledge and is the principal tool to combat mental slavery. In the *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Ashcroft notes the importance of education in challenging colonial power(s) and discourse(s):

Education is perhaps the most insidious and in some ways the most cryptic of colonialist survivals, older systems now passing, sometimes imperceptibly, into neo-colonialist configurations...Education thus remains one of the most powerful discourses within the complex of colonialism and neo-colonialism. A powerful technology of social control, it also offers one of the most potentially fruitful routes to a dis/mantling of that old authority. (425-427)

Consequently, education is an effective way to induce change and thinking, especially with regard to the Panamanian people of African and non-African descent who have been taught that West Indians are anti-national, and as a result, incompatible with Panamanian nationalism.

Cubena’s goal to dismantle the old authority is best seen in his unfinished trilogy, *Chombo* (1981) and *Los nietos de Felicidad Dolores* (1991), two diaspora novels that trace the Panamanian West Indian experience from Africa to the present. Both *Chombo* and *Los nietos* become official textbooks of the Panamanian West Indian experience

contesting falsehoods (e.g., West Indian anti-nationalism and cultural and linguistic incompatibility) propagated during the nation-building project (1880-1920).

The following discussion will examine *Chombo, Los nietos de Felicidad Dolores*, and some representative examples from his poetry and short stories as an expression of diaspora literature. Specifically, we will analyze how Wilson uses literature to construct an African identity, challenge *mestizaje* as an ideology, and develop an Afro-Hispanic/Afro-Antillean polemic initiated by Joaquín Beleño.

### ***Chombo (1981)***

With regard to *Chombo*, the entire action of the novel takes place in the background of the formal signing of the Carter-Torrijos Treaty in 1977. *Chombo* narrates the history of the arrival of James Duglin (Papá James) and Nenén to Panama from Barbados and Jamaica, and it is told by an omniscient narrator, the family members, and the ancestors. The story begins with the main character Litó (Nicolás), a descendant of black West Indians who has recently returned to Panama from the United States, and who enters a poignant discussion about race with a blind man (Don Justo). The signing of the treaty leads Litó and his mother to recall the history and the struggles of West Indians in Panama. Their narrative focuses on a story about the three gold bracelets that they trace to the arrival of West Indians to Panama and which the narrator compares to the Middle Passage. The bracelets appear and reappear throughout and they evoke the history of Papá James and Nenén, Litó's grandparents who worked on the construction of the Panama Canal. Nenén dies at the end of the novel ironically before her voyage back to Jamaica. Finally, the characters discover that the three gold bracelets, which can only be

inherited by female descendants of Nenén, have followed these generations of Afro-Panamanians from Africa to the West Indies to Panama.

The title of the novel, *Chombo*, whose origin is unknown, is a term of disrespect used against West Indians in Panama that evokes years of degradation and personal suffering (Birmingham-Pokorny “Proceedings” 48). Similar to other terms used against West Indians, such as *jumeco*, derived from Jamaican, the term can also carry positive connotations depending on the message and the messenger. Although the usage of the term by non-West Indian Panamanians is overwhelmingly negative, Wilson appropriates the negative image by naming his text *Chombo*. *Chombos* are now the center of the action, and as a *chombo* himself, Wilson takes ownership of the term and utilizes it to illustrate that West Indians in Panama are not ignorant, lazy, promiscuous, or uncouth. Instead, he shows that they are descendants of kings and queens who originated in Africa, survived slavery, and constructed the Railroad and Canal.

***Los nietos de Felicidad Dolores (1991)***

The action of this novel commences in a United States airport in 1999 (the future) where West Indian descendants are reunited to return to Panama. For their pilgrimage, the families board a plane, and the narrator reminisces about Africa and reconstructs the arrival of blacks to Spain and the New World. Ironically, these Africans in Spain are related to the same West Indian “diggers” who constructed the Panama Canal, and thus, they bring into question the extent to which West Indians are culturally different from Afro-Hispanics in Panama. The action of the novel advances to 1850, the year when the Panama Railroad was constructed, and deals with the prejudices of two Panamanian families, that of Juan Moreno and John Brown, who are Afro-Hispanic and Afro-

Antillean, respectively. The subsequent sections deal with these families' prejudices toward one another, particularly those of Moreno, which are passed on to their descendants and prevent a romantic relationship between their children. The action then moves to 1941, the year when thousands of West Indians were asked to adopt the native language of Panama or leave. Throughout the novel, the characters attempt to discover the meaning of the word *sodinu*, which is *unidos* ("united") in Spanish spelled backwards. Because of the cultural fragmentation of the characters, they are unable to decipher the meaning of the word. Instead, Wilson, the author, inserts himself in the text and explains the meaning in a letter where he relates that Afro-Latin Americans are now *unidos* and, in fact, have always been since the beginning of time.

*Los nietos* begins appropriately in an airport, a symbol of travel, flight, and voyage that characterizes a microcosm of society. Indeed, Wilson takes the reader on a voyage, albeit a symbolic one through time. The airport is a meeting place where various cultures, ethnicities, and races encounter and intersect. In addition, the airport often represents chaos, and in this case it is a metaphor for colonialism and neocolonialism which forced the voluntary and involuntary integration of distinct cultures, tribes, and racial groups. As the narrator explains: "La primera escena reúne a todos los personajes en el aeropuerto--todos descendientes de los trabajadores del canal de Panamá para un vuelo histórico a Panamá como una expresión de gran orgullo familiar y racial" (8). This is a historical flight as well as a reaffirmation of African heritage and identity. Despite these characters' differences, they all share one common origin--their relation to the workers of the Panama Canal. They are all West Indian descendants residing in the United States who are returning to their Spanish roots. While the plane ride is real,

metaphorically it represents a trip of discovery of past origins that have been obfuscated by the national imaginary.

### *Language*

Language is an important aspect of Wilson's novels which are polyphonic texts that present multiple protagonists from various backgrounds who tell the Panamanian story that is absent from official Panamanian national discourse. In *Chombo*, Wilson integrates Spanish, French, English, and Twi words, phrases, and sayings to demonstrate the linguistic hybridity that characterizes the Isthmus. Although the text is written in the official language of the country, Wilson does not lose sight of his subjects who not only converse in Spanish but also in various other languages and dialects. For example, when Fulabuta reprimands Luisa who wants to become a teacher, one reads:

¿Luisa, pour cuá tú no cocinar like petit sistá Aidita?

Quiero ser maestro.

¿Pour cuá tú no coser like otra sistá Rosa?

Quiero ser maestra.

Dotipaña no wan chombo maestra.

¿Si tú bonop watá cuá tú guain do wid arroz wit gungu peas? (Wilson *Chombo* 52)

Not only does Fulabuta believe that educating women is a waste of time, but any education that involves West Indians is regarded as meaningless. The first line of the dialogue demonstrates the coexistence of French Creole, English Creole, and Spanish. In fact, some of these words have become a part of Panamanian culture and have been identified as Panamanian English or English Creole. The term Panamanian English is

used here synonymously with English based-Creole because “among Panamanian Creole English users, the term Creole or *patois* is reserved for language spoken by Antillean Panamanians of Franco-Caribbean descent” (Brereton vi). One of these words includes “gungu peas,” peas from the *Cajanus cajan* that are also known as *guandú* (45). Clearly, language is an important aspect of this text since the West Indian community communicates in various languages and dialects. Wilson effectively demonstrates this hybridity without losing his primary Spanish audience.

In *Los nietos*, Wilson also reproduces the various levels of speech which are an amalgam of Spanish, French Creole, and English Creole. The following scene takes place in the airport.

Sí, pero rass man coño tú sae esa gial ej la organizada de ejte viaje y toavía not yet here at aeropueto-dijo ladrando atropelladamente. Nato Pataperro, interrumpiendo a Marcelina Westerman. Y como ráfagas de una metralleta continuó-: Mira, rass man look el bonchao de gente aquí como sardina enlatao. (15)

This passage not only demonstrates the various types of speech present in the text, but also privileges the spoken word over the written one. This is obviously not the official language of Panama. By including it, Wilson privileges or aligns the importance of this speech with that of Spanish and English and the written word with the spoken word. This contrasts with the linguistic representations of West Indian speech in Beleño's trilogy which were often artificial or not linguistically accurate. Also, while the narrators in Beleño's texts comment negatively on the various types of speech, Wilson naturally

integrates the speech into the text demonstrating that it is a legitimate part of Panamanian culture.

Wilson demonstrates the complexities of multiple discourses where populations displaced from their country of origin are forced to understand one another for survival. Nenén and Tidam Frenchí from Jamaica and Haiti overcome their linguistic differences and communicate with one another. The narrator explains:

Al tercer día de conocerse, la comunicación entre Nenén, expresándose mediante su inglés jamaicano, y Tidam Frenchí, expresándose mediante su francés haitano, ambas lenguas salpicadas con africanismos, llegó a su punto culminante cuando Nenén no pudo dejar de llorar al enterarse de que Dessalines, el padre de las dos muchachitas con quienes hizo buenas migas Abena Mansa Adesimbo, era amigo y compañero de trabajo de Cuffee. (Wilson *Chombo* 45)

By allowing the two women to communicate, Wilson reinforces their common African origin and experiences as exiled figures. Unlike Beleño's narrators who viewed non-standard language negatively and considered it a threat to Panamanian culture, in Wilson's novel, language is valued for its differences.

Although Wilson is concerned with preserving the West Indian heritage, he recognizes that this can not be accomplished exclusively through language. Rather, it must be accomplished through education, especially among younger generations of West Indian descendants who do not speak standard French, English, or Spanish.<sup>32</sup> The following passage alludes to this linguistic hybridity: "Cerca de los obreros dormidos estaban sentadas tres mujeres luciendo elegante ropa dominical. La más anciana hablaba

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<sup>32</sup> I use the term standard here to reflect that it is not a written language but most likely an oral version.

en inglés jamaicano, la otra mezclaba el inglés y el español, y, la más joven se expresaba en español” (Wilson *Chombo* 94). This passage strengthens Wilson’s decision to write his text in the language of the country and not that of his ancestors. In turn, Wilson aims to reach all three generations in his text and chooses the language (Spanish) that they all share.

### ***Construction of an African Identity***

It is Wilson’s construction of an Afro-Panamanian identity that originates in Africa, traverses the Caribbean, and ends in Panama that evokes a diaspora consciousness. Wilson constructs an African identity in his novels through a non-linear structure which defies European chronological time, the construction of a matrilineal heritage originating in Africa, and the use of *tremendismo negrista* to relate the horrors of slavery and the exile’s experiences of displacement. This construction of an African identity is not only present in his novels, but it is also apparent in his poetry and short stories. The following poem from *Pensamientos del Negro Cubena*, “Cabanga Africana,” captures the nostalgia that Wilson feels for his African homeland.

Me arrebataste de mi

QUERIDA AFRICA

con un diluvio de latigazos

por un puñado de monedas

y ahora una extraña cultura

es mi triste realidad.

Miserable culpable

un abrazo de muerte

es lo que anhelo darte. (11)

In “Cabanga Africana” or African nostalgia, the poet expresses the pain and suffering of African-descended populations, a pain that has resulted in the impossible return for these exiled figures. The poet also directs his anger towards a “tú” who is no doubt a composite marker for the colonizers who abducted, beat, and enslaved him.

As indicated earlier, Wilson constructs an African identity in *Chombo* by incorporating the three gold bracelets into the storyline, which represent the African heritage in Panama. This origin begins with the woman, and must continue with her as the bracelets are passed on from generation to generation. The bracelets can be traced back to members of the African tribe Onítefos who were enslaved; years later the bracelets reappeared in the Great River in Jamaica, and three centuries later they emerged in Panama having arrived with the West Indian Canal Zone workers. Francis Wilson is a Jamaican descendant of the Onítefo tribe who inherits the bracelets, but dies in childbirth en route to Panama. These bracelets, as well as the baby, are first discovered by Nenén and are passed on to her female descendants. Abena Mansa Adesimbo (Nenén and Papá James’ daughter) is the first of Nenén’s descendants to inherit them. In effect, these bracelets represent the African heritage that was lost due to slavery. As a result, the three gold bracelets become a floating signifier that links all the generations together.

Wilson possesses an afrocentric perspective, and the structure of the novel reflects this perspective. In a letter that precedes the first chapter of *Chombo*, Wilson urges the reader to fight discrimination. He informs the reader: “En la lectura que usted está a punto de iniciar, encontrará las razones por las cuales es menester y, sobre todo, URGENTE combatir la perniciosa discriminación racial y las otras injusticias...” (7).

The novel is divided into seven chapters and each one corresponds to a different day of the week. The novel begins on the day that Cubena was born, a Tuesday, and the names of the days of week are given in the Twi language of Ghana. Furthermore, an epigraph of a different Afro-Hispanic writer precedes each chapter. In the order that they appear in the novel, they include: Spain's Juan Latino, Ecuador's Nelson Estupiñán Bass, Cuba's Nicolás Guillén, Uruguay's Virginia Brindis de Salas, Ecuador's Adalberto Ortiz, Perú's Nicomedes Santa Cruz, and Colombia's Edelma Zapata Olivella. With the exception of Brindis de Salas, each of these writers comes from a country where most Africans were enslaved. These Afro-Hispanic writers prepare the reader for a voyage back in time. Not only do they encompass various countries of the African diaspora, but they also represent different time periods ranging from the sixteenth century to the present. Wilson's inclusion of these Afro-Hispanic writers demonstrates his awareness of other writers of the African diaspora and his desire to educate others about them.

As in *Chombo*, form and content complement each other in *Los nietos*. The structure of the novel is cyclical and it counters European chronological perception of time. There are eight sections in the novel that correspond to important Panamanian national historical events: the 1999 ownership of the Canal, the Middle Passage, the construction of the Panama Railroad, the year (1941) when West Indians were denied citizenship, and the present. *Los nietos* is concerned with restoring Panama's African heritage, and the non-linear time frame reflects this objective. As Luisa Howell suggests: "the lack of uniformity and or structure, is a metaphor for slavery and the black experience" ("Popular Speech" 41). Clearly, this novel's non-linear structure reflects the black experience and that of slavery; similar to slavery, the organization of the novel is

chaotic and moves non-linearly from one era to another. In addition to the main characters previously cited, there are numerous others that color the novel. However, Cubena illustrates that like the numerous slaves scattered throughout the diaspora, these characters are related not only through familial ties, but also through diasporic ones because they share a common African heritage. Thus, despite the apparent chaos present in the novel, Cubena illustrates that there is unity among these Afro-descendants.

The title of the novel, *Los nietos de Felicidad Dolores*, points to the origin of Afro-descended populations in this text. All of the characters are descendants of Felicidad Dolores. Throughout the novel, she watches over her ancestors, whether she is alive (she dies 4 times) or dead, and hopes for the unity of all of her descendants. Felicidad Dolores represents Mother Africa, and she is the thread that connects all of the generations present in the novel. As Birmingham-Pokorny suggests:

Indeed, there is no doubt that Felicidad Dolores is the bridge that connects the entire history of the African race, linking the beginning in Africa to the beginning in America, and that as such, she is the future that holds the key that will ensure the future survival of the people of African descendants. (“The Afro-Hispanic” 122)

Because the four deaths of Felicidad Dolores do not occur chronologically, they reflect the African perception of death. She dies in 1968, 1926, 1955, and 1977. Her deaths correspond to pivotal moments in African American history: the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., the signing of Law 13 which prevented West Indians from entering the country, the signing of the Remón-Eisenhower treaty which resulted in West Indian expulsion from the Canal Zone, and the signing of the Carter-Torrijos Treaty which caused her final

death. Each of these events had a profound impact on the West Indian community in Panama. Wilson's inclusion of Martin Luther King, Jr. symbolizes his awareness of other members of the African diaspora as well as the influence of the Civil Rights movement on the West Indian community and Wilson's own experiences in the United States during the sixties. In addition, many West Indians feared that the Carter-Torrijos Treaty would contribute to the loss of jobs of many West Indians in the Canal Zone as did the passing of the 1955 Remón-Eisenhower treaty.

Birmingham-Pokorny was correct when she asserted that Wilson has created a new Afro-Hispanic woman in his works. In fact, Wilson re-signifies the image of the black woman in Spanish American literature through the figure of Felicidad Dolores. She represents the hope and pain that African-descended populations have suffered and experienced. In addition, she symbolizes the common origin of Afro-Hispanics and Afro-Antilleans. Instead of being described as Afro-Hispanic or Afro-Antillean, she is portrayed as African and as such, Felicidad Dolores is a reminder that colonization has hindered the progress and unification of African-descended populations.

In "Desarraigado" from *Pensamientos del Negro Cubena*, Wilson also expresses the uncertainty and the uprooting of an exiled figure.

Abuelita Africana,  
 ¿no me reconoces?  
 Mi lengua es gongórica.  
 Mi letanía es nazarena.  
 Mi danza es flamenca.  
 Abuelita Africana,

¿por qué no me reconoces? (9)

The cultural and ethnic distance from his ancestors distresses the poet who laments that Mother Africa does not recognize him. The poet's culture, language, and religion are Hispanic, that is to say, Panamanian, which distance him from his African roots. This poem makes the reading of both of Cubena's novels much richer when considering its quest to construct an African identity.

Wilson utilizes *tremendismo negrista* to describe the atrocities that Africans experienced during their voyage to the New World. In *Chombo*, one reads:

En la oscura, fétida e inundada entraña del navío negrero, un ejército de ratas blancas nadaron con destreza olímpica entre la abundante sangre, vómito y excremento de los encadenados. Las ratas blancas saciaron su voraz apetito con las lenguas y los ojos de los negros muertos; y además, de los cadavéricos estómagos africanos, las ratas blancas entraron y salieron, en un vaivén de desesperado frenesí, buscando hígado u otro vital órgano de los esclavos. (17)

*Tremendismo negrista* permits the narrator to express the degradation and pain that Africans suffered as a result of slavery. The images of slavery mirror that of the *grotesque*. Wilson describes the rats as white animals that satiate themselves on the slaves' cadavers, and in the process, he subverts the negative stereotypes associated with blackness by making the rats white.

### ***Mestizaje***

Cubena challenges the national myth of racial harmony and the *mestizaje* ideology that was propagated during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While Litó acknowledges that the Canal Zone is the "corazón de la discriminación," he rejects

the idea that racial discrimination came with the United States (Wilson *Chombo* 28). As Litó observes: "Pero mamá--dijo el hijo--con o sin gringo aquí hay mucha discriminación racial (28)." The protagonist, Don Justo reinforces the discrimination of West Indians in the following statement: "Vuelvo y repito, todos somos como hermanos y hasta queremos al chombo negro antillano"(14). Don Justo's attempt to display racial harmony fails in the second part of his statement where he declares that Panamanians *even* love *chombos*. Also, the use of the first person plural, "nosotros," demonstrates an "us" versus "them" mentality as well as a non-inclusive one. In turn, "we," or Panamanians, is juxtaposed against "they," or West Indians, who are excluded from the national imaginary.

Don Justo's repetition of the question, "Es usted español de cepa pura?," reinforces the importance of *hispanidad*, a tenet embraced during the nation-building project of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (15). Don Justo's physical blindness is a metaphor for his blindness to his own racial identity and demonstrates the extent to which he has internalized the all inclusive ideology of *mestizaje*. After all, he is "ñato, moreno, y de pelo encrespado" (15). In effect, he serves as a metaphor for Panamanians and Latin Americans of African descent who refuse to see their African features and do not identify themselves as people of color. As Barbara Miller informs us: "The Blind man's real handicap is his denial of his people, and of the very existence of racism in Panama..." (82).

Cubena also possesses strong views on *mestizaje* and equates it with ethnic cleansing. The narrator of *Chombo* ridicules Afro-Hispanic Karafula Barrescoba for her attempts to *blanquearse*. For example, she bathes daily with five cartons of milk, straightens her hair, and pins her nose with a clothespin. Cubena utilizes humor to

demonstrate the absurdity of her behavior. But the implications are not humorous at all because they show the measures that some African-descended persons will take to achieve whiteness and acceptance. Similar to her character in *Chombo*, Karafula Barrescoba reappears in *Los nietos* and is consumed by the same hatred for blacks. She opposes the relationship between Chela and Fufo, and urges Chela to look for a “marido blanco para mejorar la raza” (Wilson *Los nietos* 75). Karafula resembles the young black boy in Cubena's short story, "El niño de harina," who pours flour over himself to erase his blackness. The effect of *mestizaje* is clear. It has caused African-descended peoples to hate themselves and everything that symbolizes blackness.

*Chombo's* Fulabuta Simeñiquez is another character who has internalized the national discourse of *mestizaje*. Known as "la quemacorcho" for burning cork to lighten herself, she frequently sings anti-chombo songs and is described as a fanatic of a conservative patriotic party of Panama whose campaign slogan was "blanquear es hacer patria" (Wilson *Chombo* 51; 50). More surprisingly: “Fulabuta, como su hermano tracallero--Arnulfo Simeñiquez--el jefe de los patriotistas, no podía ver a negros ni en pintura, es más, ella sentía un profundo odio especial hacia las negras antillanas” (50). To this end, she tells French West Indian Tidam Frenchí to encourage her daughters to marry blue-eyed *gringos* to “mejorar la raza” (53). Rabiaprieta, another character in *Los nietos*, seeks to “whiten” the black race by having babies with white men (75). While waiting in the airport terminal in the United States for her voyage back to Panama, Rabiaprieta brags about the blue-eyed fathers of her five children and seeks others in order to give birth to light children. Wilson plays with the use of names by naming her Rabiaprieta which is a linguistic alteration of the term *rabiblanco*, "the white tales" that

refers to the aristocrats or ruling elites in Panama. Thus, initiated readers will identify Rabiaprieta with these same whites who denigrate the black race. Karafula, Fulabuta, and Rabiaprieta, who represent the past and the present, demonstrate the effects of the *mestizaje* ideology that continue to plague the present. These characters' obsession with whiteness leads them to hate Afro-West Indians and by extension, themselves.

In effect, Karabula and Fulabuta have both assimilated the racial discourse of the colonizer and it is evident that society's preoccupation with whiteness and the desire to be accepted have inspired self-hatred. Although Wilson portrays Karafula and Fulabuta as obnoxious, he reveals the dire consequences of the national rhetoric of *mestizaje* on the black psyche.

Women are not the only ones who have adopted the anti-West Indian discourse. In *Chombo*, Arnulfo Simeñiquez notes: "Cuando yo sea presidente, lo primero que voy a hacer es deportar a todos los chombos de este país" (27). The name and characterization evoke Arnulfo Arias, former president of Panama who implemented the 1941 West Indian repatriation act. Not only does the name resemble that of Arias but also his anti-West Indian attitude.

Wilson contests the *mestizaje* ideology by asserting that the only way to improve the race is through education, and not through *blanqueamiento* as these characters believe. According to the narrator: "La tercera meta que se plantearon los nietos de Nenén tenía más obstáculos que un dificultoso laberinto construido por un diabólico genio blanco: el anhelo de mejorar la raza negra por medio de la educación--la única manera--y no por el racista e irracional mestizaje como aconsejaba Fulabuta

Simeñiquez...” (Wilson *Chombo* 76). This is one of Wilson's goals in writing this trilogy: to educate.

***The Afro-Hispanic/Afro-West Indian Polemic***

One of Cubena's most compelling arguments and additions to Panamanian and Afro-Panamanian literature is his problematization of the Afro-Hispanic/Afro-Antillean polemic. *Chombo's* Karafula Barrescoba is the major exponent of Afro-Hispanic prejudice, and she feels superior to Afro-Antilleans because "su lengua materna era el castellano, su religión católica, y sobre todo porque el mestizaje le había robado algo de su africanidad" (65). She decides to hide her blackness so as not to be confused with an Afro-Antillean, one of the worst offenses in Panama. Her superiority stems from her ability to trace her lineage to the more Spanish elements of Panama. For example, she raves about being a descendant of blacks who witnessed the decapitation of Vasco Núñez de Balboa (1475-1519), the Spanish *conquistador* of Panama. Moreover, she stresses that she is *morena* and not *negra* and not an “inferior” black West Indian like Nenén. Karabula abhors her own brother appropriately named Carbón for having nappy hair like the *chombos*. Fearing that his hair will cause others to mistake him for a West Indian, he proclaims in the Santa Ana plaza that he is *moreno* and not *chombo* (67).

Wilson's exposure of Afro-Hispanic prejudice towards Afro-Antilleans rejects the myth of racial solidarity among African-descended populations and illustrates the effect of migration and displacement. As Zoggyie notes: "By portraying this group as allies of the traditional villains, whites, Carlos Wilson not only exposes the magnitude of the problem of race in Panama; he also heightens the victim image he has assigned to the

West Indian population" ("Subversive tales..." 200). For this reason, Wilson goes to great lengths to trace the lineage of African descended populations.

As in *Chombo*, *Los nietos* aims to unite Afro-Hispanics and Afro-Antilleans and brings to light the absurdity of their hatred toward one another. This is evidenced by the familial feud between Juan Moreno, an Afro-Hispanic, and John Brown, a West Indian. Juan Moreno and John Brown are neighbors separated by a room inhabited by Felicidad Dolores. Their names, which are mere Spanish and English translations of one another, represent their similarities in spite of their own perceived cultural and linguistic differences. A fruit salesman, Juan Moreno tries to distinguish himself from Afro-Antilleans based on physical appearance. The feud forces Salvadora Brown, John Brown's daughter, to have a clandestine relationship with Aníbal Moreno, Juan Moreno's son. In the second section of *Los nietos*, we discover that West Indians were descendants of Blacks in Spain emphasizing their connection to Afro-Hispanics in Panama. Wilson acknowledges the irrationality of the disintegration because these groups of blacks share the common origin of Africa and some distant experiences rooted in a Spanish heritage.

The feud between Juan Moreno and John Brown is ironic because of their similar physical appearance and almost mirror image of one another. Indeed, their physical likeness astonishes both men despite their mutual hatred.

Pero el día que Juan Moreno se encontró, cara a cara, con John Brown, como quien se espanta de su propia sombra (además del parecido físico y los mismos gestos y ademanes, ambos tenían pantalón remendado con parches de tela de diferentes colores y, curiosamente, del mismo estilo de costura), en un abrir y cerrar de ojos abandonó la. (Wilson *Los nietos* 120-21)

Upon their encounter, it is evident that not only is there a physical connection between the two, but also a cultural one. These characters are obviously bonded by their common racial heritage. However, society has forced them to be rivals because John Brown is supposedly culturally incompatible with the Panamanian nation and does not reflect *hispanidad*.

These cultural differences have inspired feuds between the two families and have prevented romantic relationships. For example, Lesbiaquina Petrablanche de las Nieves de Monte Monarca Moreno opposes the relationship between her niece Candelaria and West Indian Guacayarima because it would be "una tremenda vergüenza para la familia morena" (171). She echoes the beliefs of the female characters in *Chombo*, *Karabula* and *Fulabuta*. In a conversation with her brother Aníbal Moreno, Lesbiaquina displays her prejudice against the West Indian community.

Nada de gente y mucho menos tan gente. Los chombos son brutos y estúpidos. Como son bembones no pueden leer bien ni pronunciar palabras castellanas y por eso celebran las nuevas leyes que los estúpidos no captan que son leyes para deportarlos. Sí, como tienen el pelo cuzcú y bien duro, la inteligencia no puede entrar en sus cabezas y por eso son brutos... (Wilson *Los nietos* 163)

Lesbiaquina articulates all the myths and prejudices of West Indians: their inability to speak fluent Spanish, their lack of intelligence, and their African features. When Aníbal pursues a job and writes on his application that he can speak English, Lesbiaquina is so concerned that others are going to think that he is a *chombo* because he speaks English, that she can not celebrate his accomplishment. She has adopted the national discourse which describes West Indians and blacks as inferior. Lesbiaquina fails to see that she is

denigrating herself when she makes these comments because she, too, is of African descent.

The Afro-West Indian population contrasts dramatically with the color conscious Afro-Hispanics. Nenén and Papá James are West Indian descendants from Jamaica and Barbados who have survived working on the Canal and confront racism in Panama. Wilson's favorable presentation of the West Indians has sparked much criticism as his texts most often present Afro-Hispanics as villains who help propagate the national anti-West Indian sentiment and racial oppression. However, he does not seek disintegration, but rather integration of these two opposing factions. Thus, the novel ends by rejecting the division among blacks in Panama and seeks integration within the black community.

### ***Conclusions***

In his article, "The Role of the Afro-Latino Writer in the Quincentenary (1492-1992)," Carlos Guillermo Wilson asserts that there are three major themes that plague Latin Americans of African descent: the quest for identity, justice, and cultural awareness. This same quest is central to all of Cubena's works. At the same time that he challenges the national myth of a *latino*, Spanish-speaking Panama, Cubena affirms a Caribbean heritage in Panama and urges blacks to unite. Although Wilson is at times excessive in his passion to uplift the black community and implement change, his message is compelling and helps revise Panamanian history.

The message of Wilson's second novel, *Los nietos*, is that the future will be better. In 2002, Wilson received two national awards in his native Panama: the first was the Condecoración Nacional de la Orden Vasco Núñez de Balboa, en el Grado de Caballero, presented by President Mireya Moscoso in recognition of his national and

international merit as an educator; and the second was awarded by the Comité Nacional del Centenario presented by the Panamanian Chancellor José Miguel Alemán. These awards and recognition remain important for a writer who for many years was not acknowledged in Panama. Perhaps the future will improve.

## Chapter five

### **Race, Language, and Nation in the Works of Three Contemporary Panamanian West Indian Writers: Gerardo Maloney, Melva Lowe de Goodin, and Carlos E. Russell**

In the introduction to this study it was noted that Panamanian and Afro-Panamanian identity is characterized by hybridity, diversity, and difference. Paul Gilroy's metaphor of the black Atlantic illustrates the complexities of the African diaspora and Afro-Panama which is comprised of colonial blacks and black West Indians. It was also pointed out that this diversity makes the articulation of black Panamanian and Panamanian identity problematic within the national discourse because Panama, like the Dominican Republic, desired to distance itself from the black nation of Haiti and constructed a national myth of a homogeneous nation devoid of visible African heritage. As a result, the national discourse promoted assimilation and excluded blackness which resulted in a national anti-West Indian sentiment. Therefore, racial differences have been obfuscated by the national imaginary that proclaimed Panama to be a *mestizo* nation with little African heritage. This national rhetoric has disproportionately affected the Afro-Antillean population which did not coincide with the national imaginary. As a result, the Panamanian nation-state was conceived as homogeneous and failed to recognize its racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

The articulation of race, language, and nation is problematic within Panamanian discourse because it is tied to a national imaginary that emphasizes *panameñidad* and, by extension, *hispanidad*. The following contemporary Panamanian writers are of West

Indian descent and illustrate the diversity, complexity, and the difficulty in expressing a single Panamanian and/or Afro-Panamanian identity. Melva Lowe de Goodin (1945), Gerardo Maloney (1945), and Carlos Russell (1934) demonstrate in their postcolonial works the importance of race, language, and nation as they pertain to both Afro-Antillean and Afro-Hispanic communities. In addition, they participated in or witnessed the establishment of the political, social, and cultural reforms that aimed to unite the black community in Panama. While Gerardo Maloney and Melva Lowe de Goodin currently reside in Panama, and Carlos E. Russell resides in the United States, each strives to articulate an Afro-Panamanian identity. Although these writers treat race, language, and nation differently, they are equally concerned with rescuing and maintaining the Caribbean and African heritage in present day Panama. While Gerardo Maloney evokes a diaspora consciousness in his poetry by discussing the plight of the West Indian and other diaspora populations, Melva Lowe de Goodin and Carlos E. Russell focus primarily on the Panamanian West Indian and are concerned with recapturing his/her experience.

Specifically, while poet Gerardo Maloney treats West Indianness as both an integral part of Afro-Panamanian identity and a central facet of the African diaspora, poet and essayist Carlos E. Russell analyzes West Indianness as a separate expression of Panamanian identity and argues for a post-national Panama that would view Panamanian heritage beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Residing on the Isthmus, dramatist Melva Lowe de Goodin recognizes the importance of English and other West Indian customs and tries to recapture these experiences through shared recollections.

Although many nations embrace multiculturalism and ethnic diversity, there are common claims about nationhood where "...citizens are still expected to speak a common national language, share a common national identity, feel loyalty to national institutions, and share a commitment to maintaining the nation as a single, self-governing community into the indefinite future" (Kymlicka 236). Maloney, Lowe de Goodin, and Russell evoke different conceptions of Panamanian nationhood and the incorporation of the West Indian into it. However, each one's works question Panamanian nationhood and the incorporation, or lack thereof, of the West Indian into the national paradigm. No longer forced to hide their blackness as the Afro-Hispanic writers of the nation-building project, contemporary writers do not only assert their negritude, but they also proclaim a national, patriotic, and cultural allegiance to Africa, the Caribbean, and Panama.

It is no surprise, then, that many Panamanians of West Indian descent were responsible for spearheading organizations in Panama that aimed to discuss the problem of the negro in the late 1970s and 1980s. Despite their interest in all blacks and the possibility of the unification of Afro-descendants in Panama, many of the issues that arose centered primarily on problems that besieged the West Indian community. These organizations included: *Acción Reivindicadora del Negro Panameño* (ARENEP); *Unión Nacional del Negro Panameño* (UNNEP); *Asociación de Negros Profesionales* (APODAN); *El Centro de Estudios Afro-Panameños* (CEDEAP); and *Sociedad de Amigos del Museo Afroantillano* (SAMAAP). Much like the Civil Rights Movement of the United States during the 1960s, these organizations were political in nature and aimed to unite the Afro-Panamanian community and to examine concerns that affected the population such as inequality, discrimination, and unemployment. For example,

ARENAP sought to eliminate racism in Panama (Maloney "El movimiento" 151).

However, Afro-Panamanians were not only concerned with national problems; they also participated in and organized forums to treat problems that other diaspora populations faced. For example, CEDEAP organized the Second Congress of Black Cultures of the Americas which took place in Panama in 1980. In 1981, Afro-Panamanians organized the *Primer Congreso del Negro Panameño*, a conference devoted to studying black contributions to Panama, the black's role in socio-political struggles, Canal Zone worker problems, Afro-Panamanian-Panamanian relations, and Afro-West Indian immigration to the United States (Maloney "El movimiento" 155).

Among other topics that arose during these meetings was the use of the term Afro-Panamanian or Afro-Antillean to describe Afro-descended populations in Panama. Many Panamanians of West Indian descent found Afro-Panamanian to be an adequate term to describe them, but others felt that it promoted integration and assimilation and did not reflect their Caribbean heritage (Barrow *Piel oscura* 215). Furthermore, many West Indians in Panama and the United States rejected the term because they felt that it did not promote black West Indian nationalism. Maloney advocated the use of the term because it is useful when contrasting Panama with other Afro-Latin diaspora populations, i.e. Afro-Colombia, Afro-Ecuadorian, etc. (221) Others such as Wilson and Russell preferred the term Afro-Antillean to describe the West Indian experience in Panama. Notwithstanding Wilson's preferred use of the term Afro-Antillean, he seeks unification among all Afro-descendant populations in Panama because of their connection with the greater diaspora.

These differing views of the articulation of *lo afro* in Panama reinforce why it is necessary to view Panamanian West Indian identity in the context of Panama, Africa, and the Caribbean. The experiences of Panamanian West Indians are a large part of the African diaspora, and particularly that of the Caribbean Basin. However, as Ian Smart reminds us, it is important to remember that the Afro-Caribbean people of Panama and Central America “had become native speakers of Spanish, the official language” and that the language of West Indian literature is “essentially Spanish” (*Central American* 40). In effect, Maloney, Lowe de Goodin, and Russell are of West Indian descent and their works reflect the problematic of race, language, and nation in contemporary Panama.

***Gerardo Maloney: Instilling Black Pride and Solidarity***

Born in Panama City, Panama, Gerardo Maloney (1945) is a prominent Panamanian West Indian poet, essayist, filmmaker, and sociologist. Maloney earned his Bachelor of Arts degree from the prestigious *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* and his Master of Arts in Sociology from the *Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales* in Quito. He has served as president of the second Congress of Black Cultures of the Americas, director of the department of Sociology at the University of Panama in Panama City, and honorary president of the Black Panamanian Congress. From 1994-99, he served as general director of channel 11, Panama’s educational radio and television station. He also directed the film *Calypso* in 1991 which documented Panamanian music and included a panel discussion on Afro-Panamanian music and literature. In addition, he has published numerous articles and essays about the problems faced by blacks in Panama, Ecuador, the United States, Costa Rica, and Brazil. Needless to say, Maloney is not only a scholar of Afro-Panama, but also of the Americas. Like Carlos Wilson,

Maloney also possesses a diaspora consciousness and portrays the realities of Afro-Panama and the African Diaspora in general. Ian Smart has published several articles on the poetry of Gerardo Maloney and includes him in his groundbreaking work, *Central American Writers of West Indian Origin* (1984) along with Carlos Wilson who was studied in the previous chapter. Maloney examines the experiences of the diaspora incisively in his poetry which includes *Juega vivo* (1984), *Latidos: Los personajes y los hechos* (1991), and *En tiempo de crisis* (1991). Indeed, Maloney has made great efforts to recover the Afro-Panamanian's forgotten past and his many contributions to the Isthmus which are reflected in his poetry and essays. Selected poems from the above-mentioned volumes will be analyzed, especially with regard to nationalism, patriotism, afrocentrism, and the diaspora.

*En tiempo de crisis* (1991) is a collection of poems written between 1982 and 1991 that reflects an era of national turmoil including the death of Omar Torrijos, and the U.S. invasion of Panama to oust military dictator Manuel Noriega in 1989. Several national events occurred in Panama during this period that would shape the political, economic, and cultural atmosphere of the Isthmus. For example, the president of the Republic, General Omar Torrijos Herrera (1929-1981), died in a mysterious plane crash in 1981 which led many to believe that he was assassinated because of his progressive reforms for underrepresented sectors of the population. In 1979, Torrijos established the *Partido Revolucionario Democrático* (PRD) and initiated the signing of the Carter-Torrijos treaty in 1977 which would give complete control of the Canal to the Panamanian people by December 31, 1999. Because Torrijos represented the masses and not the *rabiblancos* (i.e., the white minority of elites whom the government represented

prior to Torrijos' assuming power), he excluded the traditional elites from political power and secured political support from the rural provinces of Panama. Torrijos' regime and support for the masses coincided with reforms made in the Afro-Panamanian community. For this reason, many West Indians such as Maloney believed that his death would negatively effect the black community. In this collection, Maloney treats such diverse national and international issues as the means of communication, the economy, and United States imperialism. Unlike his other poetry, this collection treats more national themes and is more patriotic. However, in contrast to the Afro-Hispanic poets of the nation-building project discussed in the first chapter who felt torn between writing for their country and their race, Maloney feels at ease doing both. Written one year after the United States invasion of Panama which took place in 1989, the patriotic poem "Vivir para amar" expresses the poet's patriotic love for Panama.

Viviré para amarte  
 cada veinte de diciembre,  
 cuando tus hijos predilectos se acuerden  
 de tus entrañas ultraja...  
 Viviré para amarte  
 con esa ironía que te confiere tu suerte,  
 recostada sobre un istmo  
 con tu forma de S...Panamá Querida..  
 Soñaré despierto cada vez que te vea  
 dando tumbos, ante mandamases rubios y prepotentes  
 que no sienten tu dolor ni entienden tus quejas

.....

(81)

“Vivir” is the last poem of the collection and reflects a nationalistic allegiance despite Panama’s problems with dictatorship and foreign intervention. Maloney describes his country as a place that he loves and for which he desires peace and justice. Describing North Americans as “mandamases rubios,” a colloquial phrase that refers to United States imperialism and power, the poet claims that they will never understand the country’s pain or suffering and, most importantly, they do not belong.

While *En tiempo de crisis* treats such national issues as the U.S. invasion of Panama, *Latidos: los personajes y los hechos* (1991) recaptures important local, national, and international figures that represent the African diaspora. Maloney pays equal homage to ordinary people such as *el portero*, Afro-Panamanian scholars such as Armando Fortune (“Fortune”), and international figures such as Perú’s Nicomedes Santa Cruz (“Nicomedes”) and Jamaica’s Marcus Garvey (“Garvey”). On the one hand, he applauds Armando Fortune for his efforts to help all black Panamanians, and on the other, he admonishes blacks for not following Garvey’s dream to return to Africa. Thus, in *Latidos*, Maloney not only gives testimony of the “personajes y los hechos,” but he also demonstrates a diaspora consciousness. For example, in “Negro ecuatoriano,” he expresses black solidarity and identifies with the situation of Afro- Ecuadorians who, according to him, have been denied the expression of their blackness. Written in 1982, the verses of the first stanza indicate that the situation of blacks in Ecuador is similar to that found in Maloney’s native Panama. Maloney begins *in medias res* in a dialogue with his fellow black Ecuadorian brother. He begins: “Queda claro que también aquí tampoco

te han querido" (67). The poet continues and insists that blacks share "un pasado común" and "[una] herencia compartida" (67). Like Wilson, Maloney recognizes that the Panamanian experience must be understood within the broader context of the African diaspora.

As Richard Jackson observes, Maloney is a "poet of change and renewal" and promotes black awareness (*Black Writers and Latin* 153). This is evident in his first collection of poetry, *Juega vivo*, translated loosely by the author as "Get Hip." *Juega vivo* reflects the author's black consciousness, the problems that blacks have endured, and the ones they must confront in the future. For example, in "Negros civilizados," Maloney ironically points to the fact that blacks, who are now "civilized," have exchanged wisdom for selfishness, goodness for arrogance, generosity for a smile, friendship for a box of molasses, and bravery for a simple aphorism. Ironically, whites say that blacks are now civilized because of colonization and slavery (44). Over time, blacks have lost the positive aspects of their culture and traded them for such trivial items as molasses and aphorisms. Through the use of irony and humor, Maloney demeans the colonizers for imposing their culture and value system on blacks, and he blames them for the African's subsequent loss of pride and self-worth. The title of the poem is both sarcastic and ironical because according to the poet, blacks are anything but civilized if their behavior is measured by the present value system. In the end, he denounces a Eurocentric culture for having imposed its value system on blacks, a system that lacks civility according to Maloney.

The title *Juega vivo* reflects thematically and linguistically his connection with the people, that is, the Panamanian West Indian. The poem, "Cogiéndolo suave," reflects the poet's use of colloquial West Indian speech as well as his black consciousness.

Ayer...

Hey!

Tú

Chombo...Jumecan

¿Quién? Yo...

Me, westindian panamanian

nacer aquí,

gustar aquí,

aunque recordar con sabor

los tambores de mi madre patria...

Hoy...

y a pesar de todo

¡Negro!

tú na tá en naa,

la gente te está liquidando

con una sonrisa falsa

y tú, como siempre

riendo y bailando

cogiéndolo suave. (49)

The poet points out that he is West Indian but that he is also content with his Panamanian heritage because that is what constitutes his identity, that is, his West Indianness and *panameñidad*. The poet also remembers his mother country, referenced as "la madre patria," which symbolizes his African heritage. He uses colloquial speech such as the apocopation of *estar*, "tá" and the use of the infinitives "nacer" and "gustar" to reflect the first person. By doing so, Maloney elevates colloquial speech to the level of formal speech, and the oral language to that of the written word. These forms represent the speech of second, third, and fourth generation Panamanian West Indians who blend elements of Spanish and English into their speech. The entire poem is not harmonious, and Maloney ends by criticizing the West Indian community. The last verses of the poem criticize Panamanian West Indians who are described as laughing, dancing and, above all, "playing it cool." In a light tone, the poet makes fun of the black's passion for not taking things seriously even when there are serious problems. In fact, Maloney does not solely blame whites for the ills suffered by the black race. As an insider of this group, Maloney subtly points to the West Indian community's destruction.

While "Cogiendolo suave" possesses a light tone, "Nuevos nómadas" recreates the black experience of slavery and exile.

En el pasado

engañados nuestros antepasados

nos vieron encarcelar y marcar

frente a un enorme espejo.

Llegamos fatigados y temblorosos

después de largas horas de sol, silencio y látigo,

a extraer con nuestras manos  
el oro teñido con el último aliento del indígena,  
el oro que revivió el continente blanco  
oro que sirvió para inventar nuevos nombres.

.....  
Terminada la faena nuevamente nos enviaron a la deriva  
Y nos arremolinamos en cuartos pequeños de madera  
rondando el reino del fantasma  
esperando ansioso su llamada  
Pero escuchamos la dureza de su voz  
“Only White.”

-Gold Roll-Silver Linne  
imponiendo color a todas las cosas  
color al enfermo, color a los rezos, color a la risa,  
a la madre, a los hijos, al mundo,  
a cada uno de nuestros pasos...  
los mismos pasos, en silencio,  
lentos, sonámbulos, noctámbulos,

.....  
Hoy sentimos un ritmo Nuevo,  
vigor que confunde los pasos cansados, los pasos perdidos  
con las conciencias decididas. (Maloney *Juega vivo* 66-68)

According to Ian Smart, "Nuevos nómadas" brings together various facets of the diaspora experience: feelings of exile, displacement, "scatteration," and rootlessness. The term "nómada" reflects the diaspora experience because it is one of displacement, exile, and homelessness. Similar to a nomad, the diaspora figure is in search of his home and identity. This nomadic experience is not one confined to the individual; the first part of the poem describes the collective African experience as a nomadic one undoubtedly shaped by nostalgia, despair, and colonialism. Maloney returns to Africa, the origin of all blacks, and describes the initial colonization of the Panamanian West Indian. Based on deception and greed, blacks were forced into slavery and transplanted to unknown regions. But for many West Indians, this colonization did not end.

The shared experience of slavery categorizes all diaspora persons as evidenced by the use of "nosotros." This reinforces the collective experience of slavery and points to the lack of specificity. From the common experience of slavery, Maloney moves to the particular experience of the Panamanian West Indian whose experience is more complex having undergone two stages of colonization, one in the West Indies and the other in Panama. West Indians migrated to Panama in search of more opportunities only to find a new type of slavery and injustice where workers were separated by class, color, and complexion, and were distinguished by the Gold Roll and Silver Roll. Instead of freedom and economic prosperity, they encountered unfair treatment by "nuevos dueños," "nuevos amos," in "nuevas tierras." The repetition of "nuevos" reinforces the feeling of exile, rootlessness, and displacement that these blacks continuously endured. The poem's multiple references to the nomadic experience and to slavery make it a symbol not only of the Panamanian West Indian experience but also of the diaspora experience.

While “Nuevos nómadas” references slavery, in “Amo a mi raza” Maloney demonstrates black pride and awareness.

Amo a mi raza  
porque ha sido odiada  
de siglos en siglos  
bajo la rotación misma  
de todos los signos y sistemas.

.....

Amo a mi raza  
negra, fuerte y vigorosa  
que lleva entrecejas  
el misterio silencio  
de un triunfo que se viene.

Amo a mi raza  
porque tú quieres que la olvide  
que la reniegue  
que la ignore  
que acepte que ni siquiera  
debe pertenecerme

Amo a mi raza  
porque ustedes aman a la suya...  
y la portan a toda honra  
como prueba de vergüenza y de grandeza

civilización e historia.

.....

Diferente...

sobre todo por eso

amo a mi raza. (75-76)

In "Amo a mi raza," Maloney pays homage to his race and makes no apologies for his black pride and heritage. He loves his race because "tú quieres que la olvide." Maloney directs his anger towards a "tú," a composite marker for those who hate the black race. The poet continues his defense by stating that "ustedes" also love your race. The "tú" and "ustedes" refer to white Panamanians and other groups who criticize or do not understand the black's racial pride. However, Maloney no longer describes the black experience by utilizing black/white dichotomies or imagery. He describes the black experience through historical experiences that pertain to blacks as well as the imagery that best describes them. Finally, it is the poet's love for his race that will create a better future. Moreover, Maloney values his race for its difference.

Maloney is not only concerned with relating the contributions that West Indians have made to the Isthmus, but also with portraying black culture in Panama of West Indians and non-West Indians. That is to say, his poetry does not privilege one group over the other since his poetry is about Afro-Panama. Gerardo Maloney does not question his identity or that of other blacks. Rather, he is more concerned with re-affirming his identity as a black Panamanian because it has been denied in Panama for so long. As previously stated, Maloney prefers to use the term Afro-Panamanian to describe blacks in Panama of Caribbean and non-Caribbean ancestry because the term is an

inclusive one that describes the collective black Panamanian experience. This does not mean that Maloney is not proud of his West Indian heritage or not concerned with preserving it as evidenced in "Nuevos nómadas." He is equally concerned with rescuing and recapturing the West Indianness in Panama as evidenced by his documentary on calypso music, his essays, and poetry that include references to West Indian culture through language and people. However, West Indians and the Caribbean constitute a central part of Panamanian and Afro-Panamanian identity. Poems such as "Nuevos nómadas," among others which are dedicated to West Indians in Panama, not only illustrate Maloney's West Indian consciousness, but they also evoke the collective black experience of slavery and exile. Clearly, Maloney integrates all voices of Afro-Panama into his poetry and demonstrates that it is possible to preserve the West Indianness in Panamanian society without marginalizing blacks of non-West Indian descent.

***Melva Lowe de Goodin and the Use of Language in De/From Barbados a/to Panamá***

As one of Panama's West Indian female writers, the dramatist Melva Lowe de Goodin (1945) not only fills a void in the field of Afro-Panamanian literature, but also one in the field of literature written by Afro-Panamanian women. However, Lowe de Goodin is not merely concerned about representing women of African descent in Panama; rather, she explores the lives of all Panamanian West Indians. Having earned her Bachelor of Arts degree at Connecticut College and her Master of Arts at the University of Wisconsin in English, Lowe de Goodin is currently head of the English department at the University of Panama and is credited for establishing the English Language Program at Florida State University's Panama Canal Branch. Lowe de Goodin is also the founder of SAMAAP (the Society of Friends of the Afro-Antillean Museum in Panama), an

organization founded in 1981 that is dedicated to the preservation of Afro-Antillean cultural and literary heritage on the Isthmus. She has also served twice (1981-1984 and 1998-2000) as president of the organization, and she currently serves as the organization's Treasurer. To date she has one published work, the drama *De/From Barbados a/to Panamá* (1999) which recounts the historical experience of black West Indians arriving in Panama.

***De/From Barbados a/to Panamá***

Melva Lowe de Goodin's historical drama *De/From Barbados a/to Panamá* (1999) addresses the problem of language (English-based Creole) in a Spanish colonized territory. Written in English and Spanish, *De/From Barbados a/to Panamá* not only problematizes the use of language, but also denounces the years when West Indians were denied the right to speak their native language. Lowe de Goodin's fluency in both languages and ability to move between both cultures, that is, the Panamanian and the West Indian one, enables her to reconstruct linguistically and culturally the arrival of Afro-Antilleans to the Isthmus. Through the use of English and Spanish, Lowe de Goodin creates an ethnic memory that reaches several audiences, covers various spaces, and moves between the past and the present. Her work is concerned with preserving heritage, that is, West Indian culture, and emphasizes the importance of language in a bilingual (Spanish/English-based Creole) community in which immigrants search for an identity in their new homeland.

*De/From Barbados a/to Panamá* reconstructs the migration of West Indian immigrants in 1909 to the Isthmus during the construction of the Panama Canal. Lowe de Goodin resurrects the forgotten story of West Indian Canal workers that is absent from

Panamanian national history. A relatively short drama consisting of fifty-eight pages, seventeen scenes (including a prologue and an epilogue) and one act, *De Barbados* is filled with a lifetime of memories. This play, which was first performed in 1985, and again in 1997 and published in 1999, promotes ethnic awareness and pride for a people once denigrated for their “incompatibility” with the Hispanic nation.

The drama begins in the present with Manuelita Martin, a student descended from West Indians who is assigned to write an essay on the Panama Canal in celebration of its anniversary. Unlike her peers who will probably write an essay on John Stevens or George Goethals, the engineers of the Canal, she decides to write a report on the West Indian diggers. Her mother is elated and suggests that she write about Manuelita’s paternal great-grandparents, Abuela Leah and Abuelo Samuel, who her husband Jorge has invited to spend the weekend with them. Through the memories of Abuelo Samuel and Abuela Leah, *De Barbados* tells the story of three friends-- Samuel, James, and George-- and their decision to leave their native home of Barbados in 1909 for economic prosperity in Panama. James and George both die while working on the Canal, leaving Samuel and Leah to share memories with Manuelita.

Lowe de Goodin’s drama is didactic and aims to fill a void in Panamanian history books which often cite the French and/or North American influence when discussing the Panama Canal, but rarely mention the contributions of West Indians. This omission has motivated some Panamanian West Indian writers, such as Goodin and Carlos Wilson, to write and bring awareness of their ancestors’ contributions to the Isthmus. In effect, Lowe de Goodin weaves historical events into the drama by revisiting the past. As Larson and Vargas note, this use of history is typical in the works of contemporary Latin

American female dramatists. They assert: "...late twentieth-century writers who use historical events as a point of departure in their works generally do so with the purpose of revising historiography by challenging past interpretations, providing alternative readings, or restoring serious omissions" (xvii). Lowe de Goodin does precisely this by challenging past interpretations and dispelling national myths of the Panamanian West Indian population.

One of the myths that Lowe de Goodin debunks is that all West Indians are from Jamaica. Beginning with the title of the play, she claims Barbados as an ancestral homeland. During Manuelita's presentation, her teacher reveals her ignorance of the West Indian population on several occasions. Acknowledging her astonishment over Manuelita's great-grandparents being from Barbados and not from Jamaica, the teacher confesses: "Yo pensé que casi todos habían venido de Jamaica porque como en Panamá le decimos "jamaicanos" o "jamaiquinos" a todos los afroantillanos..." (1.5.27).

The second myth that the text dispels is the apparent ability of West Indians to resist illness and death. The teacher says: "Pero yo siempre tenía entendido que el antillano fue el único grupo que resistió las enfermedades" (1.7.33). This myth is challenged when James perishes in a dynamite explosion and George from a fever. As the text demonstrates, many West Indians died of yellow fever and malaria. Because so many Jamaicans died during the French project, immigrants from Barbados were recruited for the North American project. Lowe de Goodin emphasizes the importance of her story by commenting that the transmitters of knowledge are often not equipped with relating the correct information.

In addition, *De Barbados* challenges the assumption that all West Indians in Panama are of Anglophone Caribbean ancestry. The West Indian population in Panama not only consists of immigrants from Jamaica and Barbados, but there is also a small number of immigrants from the French-speaking islands of Guadalupe and Martinique. Lowe de Goodin's choice of Abuela Leah from Martinique reinforces that the West Indian population is a heterogeneous ethnic group with cultural and linguistic differences amongst themselves. This diversity arises when George expresses disbelief over Samuel's decision to marry Leah, a Martinican washerwoman.

GEORGE. You really going to marry that French Girl?

SAMUEL. Yeah, Man. I tired of this kind of life. I want to be able to go home to a woman after a hard day's work. I want to have somebody to cook my food, wash my clothes, and rub up my head when the night come.

GEORGE. But what you think you mother going to say when she come? You know these Bajan women don't like no small island French Girl?

SAMUEL. Look George. Things change. We is in Panama now. How many Bajan girls you see round the place? When Mama come she will see the situation here and she will understand. I not like you. I don't have nobody in Barbados waiting for me. (1.12.46-47)

George makes clear that despite their common Caribbean heritage, Barbadians have prejudices against Martinicans. However, Samuel's mother, who eventually joins her son in Panama, accepts Leah and their marriage despite her Francophone Caribbean ancestry. While Panamanians commonly refer to this group as West Indians, suggesting a unified

and homogeneous community, Lowe de Goodin's play is one more reminder of the cultural complexities that make up Panama and the entire Caribbean Basin.

***Preserving the West Indian Heritage through Memory***

Lowe de Goodin challenges past interpretations and reconstructs the past through the use of memory. In her seminal study, "The Art of Memory in Panamanian West Indian Discourse: Melva Lowe de Goodin's *De/From Barbados a/to Panama*," Ifeoma Nwankwo analyzed the reconstruction of common memory in Lowe de Goodin's drama and found that language, music, and orality contributed to the drama's creation of ethnic memory. Manuelita uses the memories of her great-grandparents to reconstruct their arrival of several decades ago. Through the dramatic representation of the characters' memories, Lowe de Goodin tells and shows the present generation where they come from. Memory and the act of remembering are an integral part of this historical drama. It is only through memory that the exiled figure can maintain contact with his/her displaced culture. Thus, the memories of Abuelo Samuel and Abuela Leah take the reader and themselves back to the past. Abuelo Samuel and Abuela Leah share their memories with Manuelita, and Lowe de Goodin reconstructs them for the audience and the reader in dramatic form.

Transmitted orally, these memories demonstrate the importance of oral traditions in African descended communities/cultures and show first hand how legends, stories, and histories are passed down from generation to generation. Through memory these characters maintain their cultural, historical, and linguistic ties to the Caribbean. In addition, their memories enable present generations to share a connection with their ancestral homeland. As Ifeoma Nwankwo suggests, what distinguishes Lowe de

Goodin's play is that "both the form and the content evoke and create memory" (5). It is the language that the content is written in that produces an authentic ethnic memory.

***Preserving the West Indian Heritage through Language***

The fact that Lowe de Goodin writes her text in English-based Creole and in Spanish, she simultaneously protests the years that West Indians were denied the right to speak their native language and affirms an Anglophone Caribbean heritage and identity. While *De/From Barbados a/to Panamá* uses memory to remind the present generation of Panamanians of their origins, it is the language that this drama is written and performed in that makes visible the Panamanian West Indian heritage. Lowe de Goodin's bilingual use of language remains important because as Ashcroft has observed:

Language is a fundamental site of struggles for post-colonial discourse because the colonial process itself begins in language. The control over language by the imperial centre-whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a standard against other variants which are constituted as 'impurities,' or by planting the language of empire in a new place- remains the most potent instrument of cultural control. Language provides the terms by which reality may be constituted; it provides the names by which the world may be 'known.' Its system of values-its suppositions, its geography, its concept of history, of difference, its myriad gradations of distinction--becomes the system upon which social, economic and political discourses are grounded. (283)

Language becomes a crucial factor in preserving and recuperating this ethnic memory as Lowe de Goodin preserves the West Indian heritage by writing this piece in the unofficial language of the country. In her essay, "El idioma inglés y la integración

social de los panameños de origen afro-antillano al carácter nacional panameño,” Lowe de Goodin reproduces a speech by a high ranking Panamanian government official that indicates how language contributed to the anti-West Indian sentiment on the Isthmus.

Los jamaquinos son anti-nacionales, anti-panameños. Ellos son aliados de los gringos contra las aspiraciones del pueblo panameño en ejercer su soberanía sobre la Zona del Canal. No se preocupan por aprender a expresarse bien en el idioma nacional. Yo, personalmente, no gusto a ellos...Y no es por discriminación contra su raza negra. Yo voy a Pacura, a Chepo a cualquiera hora y me siento muy bien acomodado entre los negros de esas regiones. Pero los Chombos....

(Lowe de Ocran 24-25)

As discussed in previous chapters, West Indians were viewed as traitors to the national cause and as allies to North Americans concentrated in the Canal Zone. The government official emphasizes that West Indians were viewed as incompatible with the Hispanic nation because of their use of English. The message is clear; unlike Afro-Hispanics, Afro-Antilleans were culturally and linguistically different from other Panamanians and did not reflect *hispanidad*.

In addition, the government official describes the Afro-Antilleans as *chombos*, a pejorative term used against the West Indian population. It is not a coincidence that the use of *chombo* by one of Manuelita’s classmates shows that discrimination against Panamanians of West Indian descent continues: “Profesora, en Panamá no hay jamaicanos ni barbadienses. Todos son Chombos” (1.5.27). During a subsequent reading of her story, another student exclaims: “Profesor, queremos que Manuelita siga leyendo su novela sobre sus abuelos chombos” (1.9.39). Lowe de Goodin demonstrates that the

present generation of Panamanians has been influenced by the national rhetoric that has denigrated the Afro-Antillean population. For that reason, she strives to educate non-West Indian Panamanians about the cultural legacy that West Indians have left and continue to leave on the Isthmus. Much like Wilson's novel *Chombo, De Barbados* focuses on redeeming the national and literary image of the West Indian on the Isthmus.

Lowe de Goodin is conscious of the linguistic differences among the various ethnic groups on the Isthmus and the problems that these differences cause. To this end, she writes the majority of this piece in English-based Creole "para mantener una fidelidad histórica a la realidad lingüística del grupo antillano en Panamá alrededor del año 1909" (v). The title of the drama, *De/From Barbados a/to Panamá*, reflects the linguistic hybridity on the Isthmus by not privileging one language or culture over the other. Furthermore, the bilingual title of the drama is representative of the Panamanian West Indian who over time has incorporated both languages and cultures into his/her own. The story moves historically between the past and the present, and geographically between Barbados and Panama. Both the audience and the reader are reminded of these temporal and spatial changes principally by the characters' use of language.

*De/From Barbados a/to Panamá* is a bilingual text that appeals to its native audience of Spanish-speaking Panamanians and English-based Creole-speaking West Indians. Lowe de Goodin is cognizant of her national audience of readers and spectators and provides them with opportunities to understand the scenes from the past that are written and performed entirely in English. Before each scene, Manuelita, who is telling the story to her Spanish-speaking classmates, reads portions of her essay in Spanish. Lowe de Goodin bridges the linguistic gap between the performance and the audience (or

reader) and breaks down cultural barriers that have traditionally separated the various ethnic groups in Panama.

In addition, Lowe de Goodin inserts dialectical reminders to reproduce the authentic speech of the characters. She inserts in parentheses reminders for the performers and reader of the different pronunciations of words such as “Bajan” (pronunciation: “Bei-jan”) or “baby” (West Indian pronunciation “bei-bi”) (1.10.43, 1.2.16). Consequently, this drama is just as much about language as it is about culture. These dialectal reminders emphasize that one can not reclaim the West Indian culture without recapturing the language. Lowe de Goodin could have written the entire text in Spanish to reach the majority of her national audience, but she chose to write bilingually to give linguistic and, therefore, cultural authenticity to her characters.

The characters themselves stress the importance of speaking Spanish during the early twentieth century and how this importance was transmitted to their children. Abuelo Samuel says: “Te acuerdas Leah cuando tú y yo hablábamos con Jorge en inglés cuando era joven, él nos decía No, no! Somos panameños. Tenemos que hablar español” (8). The message was clear: to be Panamanian meant to speak Spanish. Manuelita's mother reminds her that because of the negative connotations that were often associated with the English-speaking Afro-Antilleans, many of them “se disfrazaron de latinos,” meaning that they spoke Spanish at all times and converted to Catholicism (7).

Unlike her Panamanian West Indian great-grandparents, Manuelita speaks almost exclusively in Spanish. The following conversation demonstrates the linguistic gap between Manuelita's generation and that of her great-grandparents.

MANUELITA. Hola Abuelita. ¡Abuelito, que pasó! Long time no see. (Habla el inglés con acento español.)

ABUELO SAMUEL. ¡Hola Mamita! Leah, look at how big this child getting-is a long time we ain't see she.

ABUELA LEAH. ¡WOW! 'Tas grande ahora Manuelita. ¿En qué grado estás? (Habla español con fuerte acento antillano).

MANUELITA. "Año," Abuelita. Ahora estoy en quinto año de la escuela secundaria. En inglés se dice "eleventh grade," right? Pero en español se dice grado solamente en la escuela primaria.

ABUELA LEAH. I will never get this Spanish right. El otro día vinieron tus primos con tu tía Ruth y ninguno de esos muchachos entendía ni una palabra en inglés. Si viera como tu abuelo y yo machacamos el español para hablar con ellos. What a thing, eh, Sam? (8)

Manuelita, who can not speak fluent English, tries to speak English with her great-grandparents when she greets them. In her greeting, she inserts an English phrase but quickly reverts back to Spanish for the remainder of the conversation. Her lack of fluency demonstrates not only a generation gap, but also a linguistic gap between her great-grandparents and herself. Her mother, who speaks both English and Spanish, bridges the gap between the two generations. The use of Spanish by Manuelita at school, contrasts with the use of English by her great-grandparents at home. Manuelita demonstrates that children of the present generation (the play was first performed in the early 1980s) are both culturally removed from their West Indian heritage and linguistically removed.

Manuelita's fluency in Spanish and inability to speak English demonstrates how West Indians have integrated into Panamanian culture. Many of the previous generations feared that the use of Spanish denoted a loss of culture and therefore a lack of Caribbeanness. Panamanian West Indians face the dilemma that many exiled figures must confront. On the one hand, there is a struggle to be recognized as Panamanians while, on the other hand, there remains a strong desire to preserve cultural and linguistic ties to the Caribbean. However, becoming Afro-Panamanian does not have to result in the loss of Caribbeanness. This is one of the goals of Lowe de Goodin's play: to preserve the West Indian heritage so that all generations will not forget their origins. As Ifeoma Nwankwo suggests: "Throughout the play, Lowe de Goodin argues that there is no choice to be made between embracing West Indianness and embracing Panamanianness. The recognition and remembering of the Caribbeanness within West Indian Panamanian history and culture can coexist with a firm connection/claim to being Panamanian" (15).

The use of English and Spanish not only becomes a cultural and a generational marker, but also a temporal one that contrasts the past and the present. The scenes that take place in Barbados, or in early twentieth-century Panama, are expressed primarily in English-based Creole. The reader and members of the audience begin to associate the scenes that are exclusively in English-based Creole with West Indians and with the past. During the present, West Indians continue to speak English but it is mixed with Spanish which illustrates the cultural and linguistic transformation of their identity. While speaking to Manuelita and remembering her friend James, Abuela Leah says: "Lo que es más, me cuenta tu abuelo que él demoró en conseguir trabajo cuando llegó a Panamá

because he was too choosy. He didn't want to do this, He didn't want to do that" (12).<sup>33</sup>

This linguistic change contrasts with the dramatic scenes from the past where West Indians speak exclusively in an English-based Creole. Furthermore, this illustrates the coexistence of both languages and cultures that now characterize the generation of Abuela Leah and Abuelo Samuel.

The multiple languages that (co)exist in this text are not only inherent in Panamanian West Indian identity, but further illustrate the diaspora experience. The present day characters represent four generations of West Indian descendants. Abuelo Samuel and Abuela Leah comprise the first generation, Violeta and Jorge comprise the third generation, and Manuelita represents the fourth.<sup>34</sup> Violeta and Jorge represent the bridge between the disparate generations of Samuel and Manuelita because they can navigate linguistically and culturally between both generations. All of these characters share cultural, ancestral, and historical ties to Africa, the Caribbean, and now to Panama. These different generations demonstrate the process of becoming (Afro)Panamanian as they constantly (re)negotiate their identity. Each generation demonstrates how this identity is dynamic and is constantly (re)negotiated over time. Lowe de Goodin's text presents how this identity begins to emerge once Samuel migrates from Barbados to Panama in 1909.

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<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that Lowe de Goodin does not maintain linguistic authenticity with Abuela Leah who is from Martinique and would most likely speak *patois* or French and not be fluent in the English-based Creole. However, for the purposes of the discussion, it is evident that there has been some language change with Leah. I feel that Lowe de Goodin wanted to appeal to her national audience of Spanish and English-based Creole speakers and did not want to add another language to further complicate the drama's reception.

<sup>34</sup> The second generation, the parents of Jorge and Violeta, is not represented in this drama.

On his wedding day, Samuel decides that his home is that of Panama and not the one he left behind in Barbados, demonstrating the initial stage of becoming (Afro)Panamanian. He says:

Today I thank God that he has sent me Leah, this lovely Martinican woman that I married today. From now on we only going to think about making it here in Panama. We are living in Panama now. Our children are going to be born in this place. (1.15.55)

Barbados is now a distant homeland that can only be recaptured through their memories.

Thus, the process of becoming (Afro)Panamanian is demonstrated by the immigrants' interchangeable use of Spanish and English. Present day Abuelo Samuel and Abuela Leah contrast dramatically with the young West Indians who came in 1909 and only conversed in their native languages. Although Abuela Leah stresses that it pains her to speak Spanish with her grandchildren, she is able to communicate in Spanish. This is important because there remains a correlation between language use and national identity. As Frantz Fanon reminds us: "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (17-18). The characters' bilingual use of English-based Creole and Spanish demonstrates the process of becoming Afro-Panamanian through language.

Lowe de Goodin provides a way for the present generation of West Indian descendants (Manuelita) to preserve a heritage that may be linguistically different from their own, but remains a constitutive part of their cultural identity. This historical drama, originating in Barbados and ending in Panama, takes the reader and audience through

several spaces during different time periods to demonstrate the multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual nation that composes Panama today.

***Beyond the Nation-State: Carlos E. Russell's Quest to Preserve the Caribbean in Panama***

Carlos E. Russell (1934) is a professor, essayist, playwright, producer, and poet who lives in the United States. A Panamanian of West Indian descent, he is Professor Emeritus of the City University of New York-Brooklyn College, has taught classes in Latin American and African culture and politics, and African-American literature, and has served as Dean of the School of Contemporary Studies of Brooklyn College, a program which he designed and established. Russell is also a community activist and in 1969 he founded and organized "Black Solidarity Day" in Brooklyn, New York, which is celebrated the first Monday of every November. On this day, blacks from New York City refrain from participation in the social, political, and economic affairs of the city. Russell has also served as acting director of the Division of International and Urban Affairs at Medgar Evers College, the City University of New York, and has been associate editor at the Amsterdam News and the Liberator magazine.

Although he resides in the United States, Russell has dedicated his life to the preservation of Panamanian Caribbean culture, language, and heritage through his literature and activism. Similar to Lowe de Goodin, Russell writes bilingually in Spanish and English in order to maintain the Caribbean culture in Panama. His collection of poetry includes *Miss Anna's Son Remembers* (1976), *An Old Woman Remembers* (1995),

and *Remembranzas y lágrimas* (2001).<sup>35</sup> *Remembranzas y lágrimas* is a compilation of poems in Spanish and English, many of them reproduced from his 1976 collection *Miss Anna's Son Remembers*. Both *Miss Anna's Son Remembers* (1976) and *Remembranzas y lágrimas* (2001) are bilingual tributes to Panamanians of West Indian ancestry.

Moreover, Russell's poetry deals with the question of identity and the reconciliation of the Panamanian West Indian's cultural, linguistic, and ethnic ties to Africa, the Caribbean, and Panama. Most recently, Russell published a book-length essay entitled *The Last Buffalo: "Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species?"* (2003) which treats the problematic of an Anglophone Caribbean heritage in a Spanish, colonized territory. For Russell and other contemporary Panamanian writers of West Indian descent, the Caribbean is not that of Cuba, Puerto Rico, or the Dominican Republic, but instead, that of the British colonies, Jamaica, Barbados, and/or Trinidad. In his poetry and prose, Russell attempts to reconcile his Anglophone Caribbean heritage with that of his Panamanian one.

In "Silenciosamente," published in Panama's cultural journal *Revista Cultural* with the title, "Cuatro poetas o nueve poemas," Russell alludes to the Panamanian West Indian's tri-ethnicity and to the complexity of the Panamanian Caribbean experience.

En silencio

Y no tan silenciosos

Nosotros...expatriados

tras una miríada de risas

escondemos nuestras penas...

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<sup>35</sup> For the purposes of this study, only Russell's poetry written in Spanish will be analyzed.

¿Quiénes somos?

¿Quiénes somos?

Suspiramos

Uniendo dos mundos

quizá tres

Un poquito de todo

todo de nada.

Cantamos

Lloramos...en silencio

Nos escondemos tras una máscara

pero no tan silenciosos. ("Cuatro poetas" 110)

"Silenciosamente" demonstrates that identity is elusive and often indefinable. This is especially true when dealing with the West Indian population, a group that possesses multiple heritages, cultures, and languages, and is forced to articulate its identity by means of a national paradigm that characterizes everyone as Hispanic and devoid of an African heritage. In Russell's case, the articulation of this identity is even more complex because he resides in the United States and is black, West Indian, and Panamanian. In addition, he sees himself as an exile, an "expatriado," removed from his native Panama. Although Russell's poem reminds us that the exile's experience is one of silence, isolation, and loneliness, the last verses of the poem point to the West Indian's resiliency and ability to challenge the national paradigm.

While "Silenciosamente" focuses on the collective identity of the diaspora, "¿Quién soy?" reflects the individual's search for identity. Perhaps "¿Quién soy?" best

reflects Russell's questioning of identity and the complexity of the black experience in the Americas, and in particular Panama, where many blacks possess a tri-cultural heritage. Published originally in *Miss Anna's Son Remembers* in 1976, and republished in Russell's latest volume of poetry *Remembranzas y lágrimas* in 2001, the poem remains pertinent to the reader and the author today for its unresolved issues of identity.

Chombo

Mestizo

Latino

o Criollo.

¿Quién soy?

Hablo español

pues me crié en Panamá

Pero también conozco

a Mistah Caná

a Mistah Burke

Arnulfo no gustó de mi

y hoy no hablo inglés.

Materno nos dijo

que ese idioma no se habla en

Panamá

Me llamo Jones

y no hablo inglés.

¡Dicky Arias habla inglés!

¿Quién soy?

Chombo...Mestizo...Criollo...

Dime tú...Dime tú...

¿Quién soy? (*Remembranzas* 8)

The terms, *chombo*, *mestizo*, *latino*, and *criollo* reflect the poet's hybrid identity. However, these terms alone fail to adequately describe the Panamanian West Indian. Each term only reaches the plurality and multiplicity of the poet's identity. Moreover, they possess multiple meanings and reflect the difficulty of articulating a single identity. For example, while *chombo* is a derogatory word used to refer to West Indians in Panama, it can also be used in a positive way put an example of positive use of *chombo* here. Furthermore, the term is universal and may be used to refer to West Indians from the Francophone or Anglophone Caribbean. Although the term has been traditionally identified with blackness, it does not reflect the diversity among the West Indian population. The other terms pose the same dilemma. For example, while *mestizo*, *latino*, and *criollo* refer to the poet's hybrid cultural identity as a Hispanic, these terms do not necessarily define him as a Panamanian of African descent. Individually, these terms do not adequately describe his multiplicity. In effect, the poet is all of these things, but he has difficulty reconciling this multiplicity because the national rhetoric has not allowed him to celebrate his Africanness along with his *panameñidad*.

Russell's plural identity engenders the problem that many diaspora populations face. His poem "¿Quién soy?" demonstrates how in some instances a national discourse of hybridity reinforces an image of homogeneity. The terms, *mestizo*, *latino*, and *criollo* symbolize hybridity, heterogeneity, and diversity yet within the Panamanian national

discourse, they reinforce homogeneity. Shalini Puri explains this phenomenon as follows: "...discourses of hybridity have been implicated in managing racial politics- either by promoting cultural over racial hybridity or, by producing racial mixes acceptable to the élite" (45). This is not surprising because, as it was pointed out in chapter one, the discourse of *mestizaje* was appropriated during the Panamanian nation-building project (1880-1920) to reinforce *hispanidad* and the nation's racial, cultural, and linguistic homogeneity. Therefore, terms such as *mestizo*, which supposedly reflect a hybrid, diverse Panamanian nation, result in reinforcing a sense of commonality and homogeneity.

Panama's national resistance to cultural and racial heterogeneity and specifically to that of the West Indian population is recuperated in Russell's book-length essay *The Last Buffalo: "Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species?"* (2003), where he ponders the possibility of an eventual loss of Caribbean culture among present generation Panamanian West Indians. One must bear in mind that Russell prefers the term Caribbean instead of West Indian because he believes the former reflects more accurately the culture of its people. Although he uses the term to address specifically the Panamanian who like himself is of Anglophone ancestry, he also notes that he desires that Panamanians of Francophone ancestry recuperate their culture and language as well.

Rooted in W.E. B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness and Frantz Fanon's anticolonialist reading of the problematic of the negro, Russell theorizes that the loss of the English language among Anglophone Caribbeans, the disconnect with their native homeland of the Caribbean, the exclusive use of Spanish, and the integration into Panamanian culture and society, all make the Panamanian of West Indian descent an

endangered species. In effect, he /she is similar to the last buffalo who is in danger of extinction. Russell's piece is just as much about memory as it is about identity as he recalls his childhood years when he was growing up in West Indian neighborhoods in Panama: La Boca, Río Abajo, and Colón. Russell seeks a newly defined Panamanian nation that would incorporate the Panamanian West Indian which leads him to ponder the question: "Where do we, as a Caribbean people, fit within the social and political configuration of the Republic of Panama?" (20)

Russell contests the Panamanian national paradigm of language, religion, and race. He does not want to just remember the importance of his ancestors and their traditions, rather he wants to maintain them. Russell further challenges the limits of the nation-state which views the nation within defined territorial boundaries. Although Russell resides in the United States, he maintains strong ties with Panama, yet he rejects the nation as it is since it is a country that does not value the West Indian influence and, consequently, he feels threatened by the loss of the Caribbean language and culture. While it is true that Russell does not articulate his plan in terms of a post-national Panama, there are three key arguments in his essay which point to this theory: the use of English, the recognition of the exile community in the United States, and the incorporation of the Anglophone Caribbean in the Panamanian social, political, and cultural matrix. In fact, post-nationalism responds to the situation of migratory subjects and diaspora communities dispersed throughout the Atlantic. As Xiaopong Li observes:

Postnationalism...belongs to a crowd of descriptive/interpretive terms characterizing contemporary conditions of human and cultural existence--

globalization, transnationalization, postcoloniality, creolization, transculturation, and hybridity--without being reducible to them. It delineates the dual attempt to globalize on the one hand and to hold onto the nation on the other... (194).

Paul Gilroy's metaphor of the black Atlantic is another reminder of Russell's post-national Panama. He notes: "The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through this desire to transcend both the structures of the nation-state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity" (*The Black Atlantic* 19). Post-nationalism responds to the limitations of the nation-state as well as to the phenomenon of globalization. Russell's essay challenges traditional notions of nationhood and nationality and illustrates a post-national Panama, one without fixed boundaries or a static national identity.

First, the Panamanian nation that Russell articulates is not one of homogeneity but one of diversity. According to Richard Kearney: "A nation is often assumed to be a state, or a group of people aspiring in common towards the condition of a state...The nation is defined, according, in terms of a racially homogeneous 'people' which seeks out a state appropriate to its unique identity...A common sense of nation is that of ethnicity, defined in terms of a racially homogeneous people which seeks out a state appropriate to its unique identity" (2,3). As previously illustrated, Panama is a racially and ethnically heterogeneous nation, and the West Indian presence further diversified the Isthmus and threatened its homogeneous image. As a result, many West Indians were encouraged to assimilate and intermarry in order to generate lighter populations. Russell rejects assimilation as an answer to the problem of the Panamanian of Caribbean descent. He writes: "...we are in danger of total assimilation which will, in my judgment, result in the

practical disappearance of our culture, and eventually ourselves as a distinct people. This possible eventuality I regard as undesirable" (*The Last Buffalo* 26). Russell blames assimilation for the loss of Caribbean culture in Panama. In this respect, he rejects George Westerman's assimilation thesis as discussed in chapter four. Whereas Westerman and others campaigned for Panamanians of West Indian descent to assimilate into Panamanian culture and society and to prove their compatibility with the Panamanian nation, Russell rejects this strategy and calls upon West Indians to maintain their cultural and linguistic ties with the English-speaking Caribbean through memory and heritage. For Russell, there can be no compromise, and thus, he promotes "the strengthening of Panamanian culture by retaining within it a strong and visible Caribbean presence that adds to the social, political and economic vitality of Panama" (46).

Another common understanding of nation is as territory (Kearney 3). Russell is not only concerned with the Caribbean population in Panama but also the exile community in the United States. According to the 1990 census, there are approximately 30,000 black Panamanian West Indians in the city of New York (Barrow *Piel oscura* 199). In Russell's view, national boundaries should be erased to acknowledge diaspora Caribbean populations. As a result, Russell's arguments defy the traditional nation-state and that of Panamanian nationhood.

Russell describes himself as Panamanian and Caribbean echoing the metaphor of Du Bois' double consciousness. He speaks of the Panamanian West Indian experience as one of duality and describes this duality as Pana-Caribbean, "meaning the superimposition of Caribbean culture on the Panamanian social matrix" (28). Language,

food, dance, and music are all elements of Pana-Caribbean culture (33). Thus, he does not merely desire to incorporate the Caribbean into Panama, but he wants to transcend the limits of the nation-state.

Russell's choice to write bilingually does not reflect his proficiency, or lack thereof, in either language. He is completely fluent in both Spanish and English and as he acknowledges in *The Last Buffalo*, which is written primarily in English: "Yo soy aguilucho y sería raro egresar del nido de águilas y no dominar el español," meaning that he has an excellent command of Spanish (32). As in *De Barbados*, language is an extremely important part of Russell's works and is central to maintaining his Caribbean and Panamanian identity. In addition, for Russell, the use of English equates to black nationalism, especially in the case of Anglophone West Indians, and the loss of it means that he has denied himself his African roots. As Russell informs us: "[m]y reason for choosing English is in keeping with my commitment to that 'Last Buffalo,' and my sense that there is a desperate need to preserve our heritage. To do so we must master the English language, for English was the primary language of our Caribbean forbearers" (32). Furthermore, for Russell language is important because "language is the primary transmitter of one's culture. The loss of one's language is generally followed by the obliteration of one's roots as expressed through the nuances of the new dominant spoken and written word" (32-33).

One must bear in mind that other Panamanians of West Indian descent disagree with Russell's assertion that Panamanians of West Indian descent are an endangered species. Nor do they believe that speaking English is the only way to preserve West

Indianness in Panamanian culture. Panamanian West Indian Alberto Barrow, for example, notes:

Pero presentar al inglés como la base fundamental de nuestra identidad panameño-caribeña no me luce como una propuesta del todo buena. En efecto, ello niega la riqueza multicultural y multilingue de nuestra gente, congelándolo en el pasado, creando límites innecesarios, no aconsejables, que nos separan de otros negros hispanoparlantes de nuestro país, incluidos nuestros progenitores. A diferencia de mi colega y amigo Carlos Russell, no creo necesario ni posible recrear en Panamá lo que él llama una identidad caribeña...En definitiva, mantener la lengua no es un requisito indispensable para conservar la identidad étnica. (*Piel oscura* 264-265)

Barrow's sentiments are less radical than Russell's and perhaps express views of other Panamanians of West Indian descent who do not feel that it is necessary or even realistic that the present generation will be able to speak the language of its ancestors. Perhaps Melva Lowe de Goodin's piece is more realistic as it promotes ethnic memory and takes into account that present generation West Indians do not necessarily share the linguistic ties to the Caribbean.

Russell's adamant perspective about the preservation of the English language stems from his belief that the Caribbean language and culture in Panama are being lost and will most likely become extinct in future generations. His belief is not surprising because "[m]embers of a group who feel their cultural and political identity is threatened are likely to make particularly assertive claims about the social importance of maintaining or resurrecting their language" (LePage 236). Russell differs from his peers

in that he strongly believes that language is the key to the survival of the Caribbean of Anglophone ancestry in Panama. Russell's post-nationalist Panama obligates us to return to Antonio Benítez-Rojo's assertion that the Caribbean connects North and South America in another way. Russell's views on Panamanian nationalism defy the traditional construction of the nation-state by illustrating the importance of English which has been associated with foreigners, and by transcending the limits of fixed national boundaries.

### *Coda*

Although the issues of race, language, and nation are present in all of these writers' works, each one treats them in a different way. Gerardo Maloney is concerned with portraying the past, present, and future of blacks in Panama and demonstrates a broader awareness of the black problematic in his works by characterizing problems that affect not only blacks in Panama but also others throughout the diaspora. Melva Lowe de Goodin stresses the importance of language, memory, place, and identity in her work and attempts to recapture the Panamanian West Indian heritage through memory and the representation of this heritage through language. For Carlos E. Russell, Spanish is a means of communication, but it is not a symbol of the Panamanian West Indian culture or experience. Russell insists on preserving West Indian culture in Panama through memory, as well as through the preservation of English. Bilingual in Spanish and English, Maloney, Lowe de Goodin, and Russell are perhaps similar to the last buffalo in that they represent one of the last generations of Panamanian West Indian writers who are able to write, speak, and understand the language of their ancestors. However, they each contribute to the preservation of this heritage by highlighting the West Indian experience in Panama which is a large part of the Afro-Panamanian experience. By doing so, their

works further illustrate Panama's hybrid cultural identity and diversity which is colored by not only Spanish influences, but by African and Caribbean ones as well.

## Conclusion

### **Afro-Panamanian Discourse: From Invisibility to Visibility**

Geographically, Panama is the Southern-most country of Central America. It is a long, narrow country in the shape of an S, bordered on the West by Costa Rica, on the east by Colombia, on the north by a 1,160 kilometer Caribbean coastline, and on the south by a 1,690 kilometer Pacific coastline (Dogget 20). Panama's history, geographical position, and cultural hybridity have shaped the Isthmus' national discourse. In effect, Panama's geographic location has influenced its history and struggle for national autonomy.

In his essay, "Los afroantillanos en Panamá," Gerardo Maloney points out three modes of geographic exploitation that have characterized the Isthmus since the colonial period: Camino de Cruces, one of the first roads built by the Spanish *conquistadores*, the Panama Railroad, and the Panama Canal. These geographic exploitations occurred during the colonial period, the nineteenth century, and the early twentieth century and contributed to the voluntary and involuntary migration of Africans to the Isthmus. Consequently, black identity in Panama is directly related to the country's geographic exploitation.

Afro-Panamanian discourse began with a questioning of identity as evidenced in the poems "Ego sum" and "Negro nació," by the Afro-Hispanic poets Gaspar Octavio Hernández and Federico Escobar and continues to present this same problematic because of the added factors of color, class, and complexion of the Caribbean. In nineteenth and early twentieth-century Panamanian literature, Afro-Hispanic poets felt challenged by a national rhetoric that invisibilized their blackness and aimed to promote *panameñidad*. Consequently, this national rhetoric characterized Panama contradictorily as a *mestizo*,

non-black nation, and in light of such exclusion, many writers such as Escobar and Hernández challenged the national discourse by representing themselves as black, albeit with some hesitation. The literature of the nation-building project illustrated how the imaginary of the nation affected late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Afro-Panamanian discourse and led other poets such as Simón Rivas and José Dolores Urriola to write themselves out of blackness by writing for their country instead of their race.

Early twentieth-century Panamanian literature represented blacks as objects of the white man's desire which resulted in essentialisms and a deracialized discourse. For Franceschi, Korsi, and Sinán, blacks represented the "Other" and a kind of forbidden fruit. While Sinán attempted to problematize the situation of the black by exploring the subconscious fears of whites towards blacks, his depiction of blacks resulted in his reinforcing many of these same stereotypes because blacks were viewed outside of the African Diaspora discourse.

The United States has been a central figure in Afro-Panamanian literary discourse. The construction of the Canal inspired a literature that contested the United States presence. Tired of the United States occupation of the Canal Zone, writers such as Joaquín Beleño protested North American imperialism and illustrated the division among Afro-Hispanics and Afro-Antilleans caused by perceived images of Panamanian nationalism. The Canal Zone limited Panama's sovereignty and independence which it did not gain until 1999 when ownership of the Canal was transferred to Panama. However, recent acquisition of the Canal has promoted national unity (Sánchez 110). Although Joaquín Beleño protested United States racism, he failed to see himself as a

supporter of the racist national discourse which served to divide Panamanians from all foreigners that inhabited the Isthmus including West Indians.

Panama's geographic position has contributed to its economic promise and the country's exploitation. This exploitation resulted in the migration of Afro-Antilleans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and created a new "Other," that of the black West Indian. The late twentieth century ushered in a group of Panamanian writers of West Indian descent who were challenged to represent themselves in Panamanian literature. Panamanian West Indian Carlos Guillermo Wilson (re)signified the image of the black West Indian in Panamanian literature by recognizing the importance of the country's heterogeneity and the West Indian contributions to the Isthmus. He fought to change the concept of Panamanian national identity which abhorred blackness.

Wilson, along with other contemporary writers such as Gerardo Maloney, Melva Lowe de Goodin, and Carlos E. Russell, exemplifies the complexities of Afro-Panamanian discourse because their works illustrate ties not only to Latin America and Africa but also to the Caribbean.

In the early nineteenth century, nationalism was a common theme in Panamanian and Afro-Panamanian literature. Contemporary Panamanian West Indian writers illustrate that nationalism continues to be an important issue and is further complicated in the age of migration, exile, and globalization. Maloney asserted black nationalism in his works and promoted unification with blacks across national boundaries. Lowe de Goodin stressed the importance of language while Carlos E. Russell advocated a post-national Panama which would transcend the limits of the traditional nation-state.

While this diversity makes for a rich heterogeneous nation, it also makes difficult an articulation of a national Afro-Panamanian identity. Panamanian West Indian discourse challenged the early twentieth century *mestizaje* rhetoric and anti-West Indian sentiment and fought to incorporate the Anglophone Caribbean into the national paradigm. However, many of these problems remain. It should be noted that, "... Afro-Panamanian consciousness continues to be inhibited by three major obstacles: nationalism, the division between *antillanos* and natives; and a social hierarchy based in part on skin colour, which allows a select number of blacks and mulattos to ascend unhindered into the dominant *mestizo* culture" (Minority Rights Group 208-09).

Panama's size does not illustrate the impact of its multiplicity and plurality when discussing literatures of the Americas and the African Diaspora. Panamanian literature is truly a diaspora literature involving Africa, the Caribbean, and Central America. From the late nineteenth century to the present, Afro-Panamanian discourse has been transformed from a state of invisibility to visibility. This study will hopefully begin to lift a veil from the tradition of black writing in Panama by inserting it.

Upon completing this dissertation, it has become apparent that much remains to be explored. For example, studies on *Afro*-Panamanian writers remain scarce. In addition, there is an emerging group of new generation Panamanian short story writers of African descent. Carlos Oriel Wynter Melo (1971) and Melanie Taylor (1972) are two of these writers who share paternal ties to the West Indies but whose works do not exclusively treat problems of race and ethnicity. Thus, their works invite us to continue examining the meanings of race, ethnicity, and nation in Panama in the new millenium.

This dissertation will hopefully incite interest in the study of Afro-Panamanian literature and that of Central American writers.

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### **Vita**

Sonja Nora Stephenson Watson was born in Newport News, Virginia on October 4, 1974. She is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Willie and Millie Stephenson of Newport News, Virginia and the sister of Dr. Becky Leticia Stephenson of Durham, North Carolina. In 1992, she graduated with honors from Menchville High School and was accepted to the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. She graduated from the College of William and Mary in December 1995 and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Spanish. After graduating, she taught Spanish at Denbigh High School in her hometown of Newport News. From there, she relocated to Knoxville to pursue a Master of Arts degree in Spanish. In August 2000, she received a Master of Arts degree in Spanish and in August 2005, she received a Doctor of Philosophy in Modern Foreign Languages.

In 2002, she married Mr. Marcus Jermaine Watson who received his Juris Doctor and Master of Business Administration from the University of Tennessee in 2003. Jermaine and Sonja currently reside in St. Louis, MO.

In Fall 2005, she will begin a one year Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship in the African and African-American Studies Department at Washington University in St. Louis, MO.