

Liminal Citizenry: Black Experience in the Central American Intellectual Imagination

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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The Ohio State University
2011

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Abstract

Central American national literatures and social imaginaries have largely denied, ignored or, at best, minimized the long-lasting legacy of Afro-descendants across the isthmus. This dissertation examines how and why the identities of the black diaspora—mulattoes, the West Indian population that was recruited to work on the United Fruit Company’s banana plantations and the Afro-indigenous Garifuna—have been shaped historically, vis-à-vis the nation, by Central American literary discourses, from colonial times to the present day. The black diaspora is not a powerless or exploited populace, but a constituency whose local and transnational expressions of identity challenge the myths of harmony and ethnic homogeneity in Central America.

Debates about ethnicity and citizenship take place in the political arena as well as literature, where canonical authors like Rubén Darío and Miguel Ángel Asturias as well as understudied writers like Paca Navas Miralda and David Ruiz Puga have intervened at different times in history. I demonstrate that questions about the black diaspora’s relevance to Central American national cultures emerge in periods of political and economic turmoil. Chapter 1 examines travel narratives by Thomas Gage and Jacob Haefkens in order to identify the opportunities for upward social mobility available to blacks in Central America during colonial times and argues that these opportunities allowed them to exercise control of their representation in Central American letters.

Chapter 2 analyzes 19th century texts by Rubén Darío and Francisco Gavidia that subject the implicit reader to an aesthetic education by supplying copious allusions to influential works, demonstrating the Central American intellectuals' literary prowess as manifested by their ability to make blackness a sublime element in their writing. Chapter 3 examines two anti-imperialist novels by Paca Navas Miralda and Demetrio Aguilera Malta, whose novels from mid 20th century map the presence of black bodies across Central American spaces under U.S. domination. Chapter 4 magnifies the Guatemala-Belize boundary in the works of Miguel Ángel Asturias and David Ruiz Puga in order to study the *indígena/negro* divide that is at stake when intellectuals appeal to their historical connection to Mesoamerica to lay claims to Central American belongingness. Finally, chapter 5 probes strategies of national reconciliation in contemporary novels by Tatiana Lobo and Ana Cristina Rossi that stress the need to recover and salvage black histories in order to unearth these communities from oblivion. The different moments studied give rise to debates between insiders and outsiders of the Central American black diaspora about the relationship of ethnicity to national identity.

Dedication

A mis queridos padres, Marcelo y Marta Gómez

A mi abuela, Alejandra Arriola vda. de Gómez

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the many individuals whose paths have crossed mine since I discovered my passion for writing about Central America. Their encouragement and insights have made writing this dissertation a true pleasure.

I wish to thank first and foremost my advisor, Dr. Abril Trigo, for his tireless support. From the day I came to your office to discuss this dissertation to the last days of drafting and editing this manuscript, your analytical insight and critical expectations have been crucial to the development of this project. You taught me never to sell myself short and to wait patiently for my professional life to unfold. Dr. Ana del Sarto and Dr. Laura Podalsky, your wholehearted support of my professional pursuits and impressive expertise have been invaluable to me. To all of you: I admire your rigorous approach to the field and am truly lucky to have you as my readers. I hope to someday be as inspiring and influential to others as you all have been to me.

I have been fortunate to count on the support of my very special mentors at California State University-Northridge. Dr. Beatriz Cortez, you told me as an undergraduate student that I should follow this career and I've never looked back on that decision. Your love for the isthmus, your critical mind and the passion you devote to bringing students like me closer to Roque Dalton and our other Central American gems is

exemplary. Dr. Carrie L. Saetermoe, you have been such a great inspiration and have helped me to seek out ways in which I can be a different kind of scholar. Dr. Sheena Malhotra, Dr. Elizabeth Say and Dr. Marta López Garza: I thank my lucky stars when I think about how fortunate I was to learn from you.

I would like to recognize the faculty at the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the Ohio State University for their support and assistance in developing my research interests. When I came to Columbus determined to study nothing other than Central America, Dr. Ignacio Corona, Dr. Lúcia Costigan, Dr. Maureen Ahern, Dr. Richard Gordon and Dr. Fernando Unzueta filled my heart and mind with a profound love for the whole of Latin America. Dr. Lisa Voigt, I am grateful for your careful reading of my job application materials, particularly for your assistance with my writing sample, an early version of the first chapter of this manuscript. Dr. Samuel Amell, I was blown away by your ability to make me see Spain with new eyes. Dr. Terrell Morgan, my gratitude to you for allowing me to pursue my research at the SSAST programs in Antigua, Guatemala and Granada, Nicaragua. Most importantly, how can I possibly begin to thank you for making me realize that being a heritage speaker is not a weakness, but a treasure trove? Dr. Ileana Rodríguez, your devotion to literature and your intellect has moved me since I met you over ten years ago in Los Angeles. You taught me that this work is a love affair that I should never abandon... I never will.

A very special note of appreciation to Dr. Lowell Gudmundson and Dr. Catherine Komisaruk, who without ever having met me, provided me copyedits of their work before publication. Dr. Todd Little-Seibold and Dr. Ben Vinson also graciously sent me

their conference presentations and articles in progress. Your innovative scholarship in the field and your generosity are deeply appreciated.

My years at Ohio State would not have been the same without the friends whose unconditional love and infectious laughter made the snowy, icy winters in Ohio enjoyable: Dr. Rebecca Carte, Dr. Magdalena Mejía Gómez, Dr. Elena Foulis, Dr. Jacob Schott, Dr. Raquel Pina. I had the good fortune of sharing an office with Ana Echevarría-Morales, Maribel Corona, María de Jesús Robledo and Aida Roldan—colleagues whose encouragement in the form of words, advice and cookies made the preparation of this manuscript a real delight. Dr. Anne-Marie Pouchet, you may very well be in Trinidad and Tobago but a friendship like ours means that only a few insignificant miles separate us. Dr. Leticia Carrillo, girl, the road from our *barrios* to academia has been long and the lessons learned have been many. Daniela Salcedo, our friendship was sealed on the volcanoes and lakes of Nicaragua and I must thank you for always reminding me to put into perspective what matters most... like not wearing pretty sandals when climbing volcanoes. Sébastien Thomas de la Pintièrre, you accompanied me on this journey on paths winding through America, Europe and Africa, always encouraging me to keep my eyes on the prize. Mary Elizabeth Beaton, you gave this Latina from South Central Los Angeles a Midwestern home and have made “unconditional” the most relevant of adjectives as I approached the final stages of this project and my last days in Columbus.

None of this would have been possible without my family and it is to them that I'd like to address the final words on this page. Meli: The Hungarian writer Sándor Márai once wrote that we all have witnesses, people who give evidence of who we are and who we have been in life. You will always be my witness. Marcelo: I know of no one else

with a greater capacity to transform himself and his world. May you continue on your path to Mecca. Mamá y Papá: ustedes salieron de El Salvador conmigo en brazos y con grandes ilusiones para mi futuro mientras que la guerra arrasaba con las vidas y los sueños de tantos en nuestro país. A ustedes y a mi abuela Alejandra, quien nos acompañaba, les debo la lección más importante de mi vida. Sepan que ustedes son un gran ejemplo y siempre he admirado sus esfuerzos. Tienen todo mi respeto.

Vita

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Publications

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“De tal palo, tal astilla: la huella de la memoria en *Obabakoak* y su adaptación cinematográfica, *Obaba.*” *Divergencias: revista de estudios lingüísticos y literarios* 7.2 (2009): 13-22.

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Fields of Study

Spanish and Portuguese
Central American Cultural Studies

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Vita.....	ix
List of Figures.....	xii
Introduction.....	1
Chapters	
1. Color-Coded Letters: Racial Passing and the Discourses of Power.....	25
2. Intellectual Rapture: On Good Taste, Blackness and Poetic Passions.....	71
3. Cartographies and the Mapping of Bodies in Anti-Imperialist Narratives.....	110
4. Mesoamerica, Citizenship and the Politics of the <i>Indígena/Negro</i> Divide.....	147
5. Novel Reconciliations.....	176
Conclusion.....	213
Works Cited.....	218

List of Figures

Figure 1. Map of Central America Highlighting the Concentration of the Black Diaspora.....	5
Figure 2. Manuel Arellano, <i>Rendition of a Mulatto</i> (1711).....	33
Figure 3. Miguel Cabrera, <i>4. De español y negra, mulata</i> (1763).....	53
Figure 4. Miguel Cabrera, <i>5. De español y mulata, morisca</i> (1763).....	54
Figure 5. Miguel Cabrera, <i>7. De español y albina, torna atrás</i> (1763).....	55

Introduction

To write about ethnicity in Central America—a narrow isthmus that is sometimes considered an extension of the North American continent, on occasion conceived as a strip of Caribbean nations and nearly always imagined as a peripheral Latin American region—is a venture into a rich terrain of cultural dynamics. It is a journey that, admittedly, most Central Americans have been hesitant to take. The national imaginaries that were constructed by the *criollo* elites in the wake of independence posited Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama as an economic union of culturally *mestizo* states. The burden of the region’s intellectuals has been to establish its relationship with “Nuestra América” and this is one of the grounds over which this trek leads. Crossing the fissures and crevices of this terrain leads us to the unsettled soil of a Central American identity.

This is, after all, a venture and like any other it implies a risky undertaking. It is a dare to explore a matter that might be unpleasant at times and carries with it the risk of loss. Sifting through the soils of Central American ethno-linguistic identities doesn’t result in the neat distribution of types in distinct categories. It raises more questions. Who is Central American? Who belongs in Central America? Who *is* there? As trite as these rhetorical questions may appear, they inform the process of naming that is at the crux of this dissertation. The matter at hand is who is *allowed* to feel like and be defined as

Central American. Sifting through the cultural debris of the last two hundred years reveals that the exclusion of the black experiences is a common feature of a *transisthmus* Central American intellectual tradition. The purpose of this study is to turn to critical socio-cultural moments in the history of these nations to uncover the unequal distribution of privileges afforded by color, language and space.

The Black Diaspora

In this dissertation, I frequently use the term “black” and I acknowledge that this term may be controversial in some contexts. However, I use it deliberately throughout this manuscript to evoke its socially constructed and political character. This use of the ideologically polluted term “black” may certainly face three objections. First, scholars might find fault with my use of the term to refer to descendants of slaves in the colonial period whose cultural experiences and even phenotypic characteristics have been transformed by decades of interracial crossings, leading them to adopt a conception of self and subjectivity that is not politicized on the basis of a connection to African peoples. Second, it may appear problematic to use the term to refer to the Garifuna people, who may be better served by the appellation “indigenous” despite their highly transformative degree of exchange with runaway slaves over the course of three centuries. Third, using the term might appear to conflate the political interests of groups whose conceptions of self and community defy comparison.

I am fortunate to submit this dissertation for approval just as two monumental works that address the term make their way to my desk hot off the press. Mark Anderson’s *Black and Indigenous: Garifuna Activism and Consumer Activism in*

Honduras (2009) emerges from the field of anthropology to look anew at the categories of Negro and Indian, blackness and indigeneity—in place since the eighteenth century—to ponder the investments that go into the making and marking of ethnic compositions such that indigenous people can never be seen as black. The study, largely based on ethnographic fieldwork, asserts the appropriateness of both terms for this Afro-indigenous group. The volume *Blacks and Blackness in Central America* (2010), edited by Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe, emerges from the discipline of history to affirm that slavery and segregation in the colonial period underpin the liberal ideals promoted in Central America on the eve of independence. These scholarly antecedents aid in responding to the first two challenges to my usage of the term “black” and it is my hope that my understanding of “diaspora” as the dispersion of settlements will allay the concern that I seek to homogenize peoples whose Central American destinies are indeed distinct to each group. In fact, it is my intention to highlight how literary and political forces have been complicit in fashioning this diaspora as a uniformly liminal citizenry despite their remarkably distinguishable cultural features.

The question of the black diaspora in Central America differs dramatically from that of Afro-descendants in the Caribbean or Brazil. The possibility of an analogy is thwarted by the absence of a flourishing plantation economy in the colonial histories of Central America—a factor that has had significant implications for recognizing blackness in the isthmus. Furthermore, analogies to other Latin American contexts cannot be sustained when one examines the groups that have come to comprise the black diaspora in Central America. My dissertation tracks how literary discourses reflect the changing

hegemonic discourses regarding blackness as the black diaspora comes to include mulattoes, Miskitus, Garifuna and West Indians (Figure 1). The paragraphs that follow detail the specific features of these groups in order to underscore how I approach the black diaspora in this study.

Mulattoes were absorbed into the principal cities of Central America along the Pacific Coast on the eve of independence. The categories of “black” or “mulatto” that had existed in the colonial period were irrelevant to the leaders of the new Central American nations and they oversaw the elimination of such categories from censuses altogether. Nonetheless, archival records document the overwhelming presence of mulattoes in the military and in other notable positions of prestige in the principal cities of the isthmus—Guatemala City, San Salvador, Tegucigalpa, Managua, San José and Panama City—all clustered along the Pacific Coast. A message was issued from the core of these new Central American nations: the citizenry was of a *mestizo* source and blacks were elsewhere. Black peoples in the Central America imagination became virtually absent from “the interior” districts that are the reference point for the national imaginary. Unlike the mulatto sectors of the population whose strategies of racial passing allowed them to integrate all echelons of colonial society in the “interior,” Garifuna and West Indian groups have quite literally been condemned to the fringes of Central American societies.

The Miskitu is a group that primarily resides along the Atlantic Coasts of Honduras and Nicaragua. The Miskitu Sambu, an Afro-indigenous group that resulted from contact of runaway slaves with the indigenous peoples of the coasts during the colonial period, is one branch of the Miskitu. The Treaty of Friendship and Alliance

The Black Diaspora



Figure 1: Map of Central America Highlighting the Concentration of the Black Diaspora

signed with the British in 1740 ensured the Miskitu right to self-rule, guaranteed British protection in the event of Spanish encroachment on the Miskitu Coast and fomented economic ties between the two in the form of Miskitu's active participation in the slave trade. The complex history of the community doesn't end there. From the eve of Central American independence when a great number of Miskitu relocated to Belize, then known as British Honduras, to escape the Nicaraguan and Honduran government to their most recent involvement in the Contra war against the Sandinistas, this Afro-indigenous group has been accused of an ambivalent loyalty to the nations of the isthmus.

The Garifuna, an Afro-indigenous group that primarily resides in Belize, Guatemala and Honduras, is another important community that constitutes the black diaspora in Central America. Their history in Latin America begins with the shipwrecks of two British vessels near the island of St. Vincent. On both occasions, the slaves swam ashore and eventually intermarried with the indigenous Arawak of St. Vincent. In 1796, the Garifuna people were accused by the British of cooperating with rival French enemies, driven off the island of St. Vincent and taken by the British to the island of Roatán, off the coast of Honduras. Over the course of over three hundred years, the Garifuna peoples established communities on the Central American Atlantic Coast. The UNESCO declared the Garifuna culture a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity in Nicaragua, Honduras and Belize in 2001.

Unlike the aforementioned black communities, the West Indian community was recruited in the early twentieth century to work on the banana plantations across Central America and the Canal Zone in Panama. Of particular interest to this analysis is the

manner in which their communities were settled over the standing Miskitu and Garifuna homelands. In Guatemala, they settled in the towns of Bananera, Livingston and Puerto Barrios. In Honduras, the largest groups settled in Trujillo and La Ceiba. In Nicaragua, one finds the largest number of West Indians in Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon. Costa Rica's largest West Indian community is in Port Limón. Lastly, Panama's largest West Indian communities are in Bocas del Toro and in the Canal Zone. The Canal Zone and the United Fruit Company thrived thanks to the West Indian labor force that was recruited from Anglophone Caribbean countries and was later denied repatriation, despite contractual clauses and the many protests headed by black activists who wished to return to their homelands. In contrast, "Creoles" in Belize are the second largest group and hold positions of power in all levels of government and society.

Mulattoes, Garifuna, West Indian immigrants and their descendants constitute the black diaspora—and are coded as such within the nations they inhabit—though their histories bear little resemblance to each other. Moreover, the social, economic and cultural conditions of these communities differ also according to each country's ethnic composition, economic structures and historical processes. Nevertheless, black subjects are generally bound by the common experience of being erased from national discourses despite their physical presence throughout the isthmus. As the scholarly studies *Dollar, Dove, and Eagle: One Hundred Years of Palestinian Migration to Honduras* (1992) by Nancie L. Gonzalez, *Memories of a Future Home: Diasporic Citizenship of Chinese in Panama* (2005) by Lok C. D. Siu and the documentary *The Civilizers: Germans in Guatemala* (1997) directed by Uli Stelzner and Thomas Walthe demonstrate, the

perceived contributions of other “minorities” to their respective national patrimonies has been largely unquestioned. Across Central America, it is the black diaspora living and residing in the isthmus whose rightful belonging is questioned. The grand narratives of nation-states are not based on units of exactitude, but rather on their ideological weight. Notions of rightful belonging are presupposed on perceptions compiled as an imagined register, if you will, of the black diaspora’s contribution to the cultural patrimonies of the isthmus. Their very presence is a destabilizing factor in discussions of Central American experience.

The unique histories of the communities that constitute the black diaspora have led me to examine the importance of key historical and economic shifts beyond the push-pull factors that critics normally consider when exploring the mobility of groups across national boundaries. Rather, I have a keen interest in exploring the “ripple effects” of these junctures on the national imaginaries. Seen in this manner, the role of the culture industry is to respond by marking geographic, linguistic and ethnic divides. The periods of socio-economic transition I explore in this dissertation—Independence, the formation and dissolution of the Federal Republic of Central America, the conversion of Central America into “banana republics,” foreign investment in the building of the Panama Canal, the rise of military dictatorships and the processes of globalization—demand the demarcation of the territory to be considered Central America and definition of who is rightfully Central American. The debates about the relationship of citizenship that find a central place in the political arena are transposed to literature where its instrumental role becomes providing an inventory of legitimacy and liminality.

Ethnicity and race are social constructions that are fashioned both within and outside the parameters of the social groups they are meant to define. Hence, attention to official national discourses in tandem with macro-level processes is necessary as we begin to examine that compulsory inventory of rightful belonging to the isthmus. The mulattoes of Central America transition from what Darcy Ribeiro calls a “spurious” culture to a “genuine” culture centuries before notions of race/ethnicity come to trap black bodies with their representations. The belief that an ethnic component made the Miskitu and the Garifuna “more” indigenous than black has led these groups to escape classification as the latter as the latter and benefit—to a certain degree—from the autonomy afforded by the confusion resulting from the seemingly incompatibility of both designations. As identity politics become important in the era of globalization, so too do we observe “strategic essentialism,” a term coined by Gayatri Spivak to speak of shifting alliances for the benefit of a collective. The West Indians in the isthmus—initially conceived of as the black race come to wreck the homogeneity of Central American populations—have come to be termed *creoles* in Nicaragua and *afrocostarricenses* in Costa Rica amongst the “polite society” of those countries. The examples are numerous but the shift from a racial classification to an ethnic classification isn’t purely semantic—it bears the answer to riddles about the position of black bodies in specific socio-historical contexts.

There are different degrees of acknowledging the presence of blackness within the boundaries of Central American nations and as the most recent (at the time of submission of this dissertation) censuses from the seven nations illustrate. The 2010 Belizean census

lists its five principal groups as: mestizo, creole, maya, mixed and garifuna. The 1994 Guatemalan census lists three categories: *indígena*, *no-indígena* and *ignorado*. The 2001 Honduran census doesn't list a single category to account for race or ethnicity within its national boundaries. The 2007 Salvadoran census experimented with the racial categories established in 1930 (*blancos*, *indios*, *mestizos*, *amarillos*, *negros*, *otros*) and after eliminating "indian" as a race, replaced it with "ethnic groups"—better suited to the multicultural jargon of the present historical juncture—in order to account for indigenous groups. Having kept black a racial category, the discussion that accompanies the table with the data ensures the readers that these must be foreigners. Nicaragua names its Creole and Miskitu communities ethnicities in its 2005 census in the same manner that "Black/Afro-Costa Rican" becomes listed as an ethnicity on the 2000 Costa Rican census. Of all Central American countries, Panama is the only country to list five different types of "black populations" on its 2010 census: *negro colonial*, *negro antillano*, *negro*, *otro*, and *no declarado*. While the first two categories mark the subject's historical entry into the nation, the last three reflect the objective of this long *parcours* of census-derived categories. Race? Ethnicity? Both? What is certain is that these social constructions, while ambiguous, locate the black diaspora within discursive systems of power and emerge within historically grounded conditions for their use.

Critical Milestones

This dissertation draws from critical milestones in a broad range of academic fields that assist in a comprehensive understanding of the black diaspora in Central America. Observations from many disciplines have paved the road that makes this

dissertation possible. First, it gains an anthropological perspective on the black diaspora's culture and discrimination in the isthmus through Santiago Valencia Chalá's *Blacks in Central America* (1986). The study largely focuses the history and belief systems of the Garifuna while the remainder is devoted to the specific situation of the colonial and West Indian populations in Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. The demographic data recorded by Valencia Chalá facilitates an understanding of the black diaspora across the "*mestizo*" nations of Central America in the eighties. It is worthwhile to mention that a comprehensive study on the subject of this magnitude has yet to be replicated.

My project responds to the need to decenter the subject of Latin American and Black Studies: the *mestizo* subject in the first case and the Anglophone black subject in the second case. Andrew Juan Rosas (1996) argues that as an analytical point of departure, the notion of *mestizaje* risks freeing Europeans of their historical crimes as well as dislocating and devaluating the African factor in the Americas. He stresses that, "the inability of Latin American studies to dismiss the notions of the *mestizo* and place Africans in the Americas in the proper historical Pan Africanist context underlines the necessity for the African Latin component within the field of Africology." (287). A landmark essay in its time, Richard L. Jackson's "Black Themes in Spanish American Literature" (1977) considers the literary manifestations of "black phobia" in the representations of black characters in Brazilian and Puerto Rican literature. Jackson explains that not all of the literature written about black subjects replicates a sense of racial superiority, acknowledging cases in Cuban, Dominican, Costa Rican, Colombian

and Ecuadorian literature. Jackson's observations are relevant to my research inasmuch as they help me bridge conclusions about Caribbean *mestizo* and black identities to a Central American context.

This dissertation likewise intersects with the questions raised by theorists in the field of Black Studies. Michael George Hanchard (2007) observes that the scholarly enterprise of African American Studies, including its curricula, scholarship, methods and training, will be diminished if the discipline continues to only concern itself with the United States. He concludes that Africans and the African diaspora at large are in the process of realigning transnational black politics and cultures and Black Studies must confront the challenge of addressing the developments. Although their examples and claims have been most frequently associated with the black diaspora in England and the United States, the observations of Paul Gilroy and Anthony Appiah are crucial to this analysis in their critical assessment of blackness. As Paul Gilroy argues in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) that it is imperative to examine the processes of cultural mutation and discontinuity that the terms creolisation, métissage, mestizaje and hybridity cannot fully address. Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House* (1992) draws on the seminal works of politicians, creative writers and philosophers from Africa and the black diaspora to formulate a discussion of the strategic value as well as the limitations of an essentialized African identity in the twentieth century.

The process of validating the black experience and recuperating texts that had been written by Afro-Latin Americans began in the 1930s through negritude movements and reached its height in the 1970s in the context of the black power movements forged

by the black diaspora on multiple continents. Ian Smart was the first critic to observe how immigration patterns from the Caribbean islands to what he calls “the rimlands” resulted in a new type of literature: “black Central American literature.” His groundbreaking *Central American Writers of West Indian Origin: A New Hispanic Literature* (1984) focuses on literature produced by members of the third generation of the Caribbean diaspora in Panama and Costa Rica, but also included writings by *mestizo* authors. Smart argues that African heritage constitutes one of the defining features of the cultural production of both the Caribbean basin and the rimlands, but that while *mestizo* writers tend to weave narratives around *mulatto* characters, black Central American authors relay an integrally black perspective on race relations with which the black diaspora can identify regardless of their nationality. Smart finds that in contrast to *mestizo* writers’ concern with interracial relationships, the West Indian writer is more politically grounded to the extent that spirituality and the luscious landscape foreground conflicts originating on the banana plantations and canal zones that permeate the interpersonal relationships of the community at large rather than romantic relationships. My dissertation challenges Smart’s observation and responds that instead of producing representations divorced from political reality, *mestizo* writers issue representations of blackness in reaction to critical socio-historical phenomena.

Like Ian Smart, Dorothy Mosby focuses on writers of West Indian origin because she perceives no historical continuity between colonial blacks and the West Indian immigrants that began arriving in the country as free laborers in 1872. Her contribution to the field, *Place, Language and Identity* (2003), is a history of the black literature in Costa

Rica and a critical assessment of the black diaspora's poetry and fiction through a postcolonial lens. In the case of Costa Rica, the myth of whiteness contributes to the invisibility of a rich Afro-Costa Rican literary tradition that crystallizes in the reconstitution and reconceptualization of identity from West Indian to Afro-Costa Rican identity. Mosby's central claim is that the Afro-Costa Rican writers' ability to affirm "belongingness" in their native land and assert a presence in the country's literary culture is still a "dream deferred." My dissertation follows Mosby's thread to consider the impact that multicultural discourses have had on the black diaspora's place in the national imaginary.

The aforementioned projects affirm both the existence of the black diaspora in the isthmus as well as their legacy in the realm of letters, at once ascribed to the Caribbean and the Latin American traditions. This dissertation is prompted by a fork in the road in Central American literary production and criticism, namely the emergence of post-civil war nihilist narratives alongside cultural production that highlights the isthmus as a site of multicultural, plurinational, transnational—the terms have not been agreed upon—experiences. These motives have given rise to projects such as *Istmo: Revista virtual de estudios literarios y culturales centroamericanos*, an online academic journal that articulates in its mission statement a keen awareness of the diverse experiences of Central American-ness:

Esta heterogeneidad cultural posibilita la articulación e integración de las diversidades étnicas, sociales y de género de la región, en torno a metas políticas, económicas, y ecológicas comunes. Como objeto de estudio, las culturas

centroamericanas constituyen un espacio en el que los pueblos de las subregiones se encuentran y muestran su diversidad, al margen de los estados centrales y nacionales. Esta diversidad articula identidades históricas de las que las lenguas, literaturas, culturas visuales y escénicas, tradiciones y demás elementos culturales fundamentales, constituyen expresiones muy importantes. (*Istmo* 2000)

Serious treatment of the black Central American question has marked the journal from its first edition in 2001, which featured Belizean writer David's Nicolás Ruiz Puga's survey of his nation's literary history. Its 21st issue, the most recent at the time of this dissertation's approval, is a monographic volume that bears the title *Las culturas del Caribe centroamericano* (2010) edited by Valeria Grinberg Pla. Aside from integrating articles from this electronic journal into these chapters, this dissertation itself is part of the burgeoning body of literary and cultural criticism that responds to questions that emerge from a context of globalization. The scholarship on Afro-Central American experience throughout the decade of *Istmo*'s editions situates this dissertation in the context of a nascent body of criticism that seeks to excavate the signs of black experiences in Central America.

Willful forgetting may very well have been at the root of the paucity of critical analysis on Central American blackness in the Humanities from the nineteenth century to the mid-nineties, but it is deliberate collective memory that has led to increased attention in this subject matter since the end of the region's civil wars. As Maurice Halbwachs argues, society often obliges us not just to reproduce memories but also to modify them, shorten, or complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are

intact, we give them a prestige or devaluation that they did not possess in actuality (51). Memory is only viable within the socio-political frameworks available to people living in a society to determine and retrieve their recollections.

Contribution to the Field

As a comparative analysis of race/ethnicity in the isthmus rather than a study of the literary and cultural traditions of a particular nation, my dissertation makes a distinctive contribution to the field. Recent debates about black Central American identity are not, as some critics and ethnographers argue, evidence that these communities have been submerged in silence and powerlessness (Valencia Chalá, 1986, Martínez Montiel 1993, Ramírez 2007). Rather, these debates reflect and actively intervene in complex and contradictory processes of reaffirmation of black Central American identities accomplished through national and global recognition. The very presence of Afro-Central Americans forces politicians, economists, historians and the population at large to recognize the black diaspora as a constitutive citizenry of the Central American nations at moments of critical political and economic significance.

Studies on the black diaspora have tended to focus primarily on the West Indian population in Costa Rica (Meléndez and Duncan 1972, Chomsky 1996, Harpelle 1996, Viales 1998); or the West Indian laborers hired to work on the Panama Canal (Conniff 1985, O'Reggio 2006). Although slavery was instituted across Central America and independence granted manumission to thousands of individuals, only two full-length works focus on the descendants of slaves in Costa Rica and one on the descendants of slaves in Nicaragua (Aguilar Bulgarelli and Alfaro Aguilar 1997, Cáceres 2000, Ramírez

2007). The civil wars in Honduras and Guatemala not only led to the displacement of the Miskitu and Garifuna populations, they also compelled these groups to appeal to the United Nations to advocate for their cultural rights (Tazewell 1984, González 1988, Pineda 2006, Anderson 2009). Currently, there are no studies devoted to the black diaspora in El Salvador, where laws prohibiting blacks from entering the country were not repealed until the 1980s.

This dissertation provides a more nuanced analysis of the factors that foster debates over the Central American black diaspora as it appears in the literary tradition. The black diaspora can be conceived as a counterculture with its own local and global expressions that has left a mark on the collective Central American memory. While the particularities of this study are specific to the isthmus, they thematically resonate with the ways that peripheral ethno-linguistic minorities are absorbed in postcolonial societies and thus have implications for contexts beyond Central America. Furthermore, globalization is making local cultural heritages increasingly important in a world market that values cultural difference, promotes the circulation and consumption of “ethnic” cultural products and showcases its once peripheral communities in an effort to profit from cultural tourism (Yudice 2003, García Canclini 2001, Appadurai 1996). The Central American black diaspora offers a fruitful case study of marginal identities that challenge the homogenizing demands imposed upon them by their own nation-states and global modernity itself. Its cultural and political anchors have remained intact despite the violent government attempts to suppress distinctions among citizens based on background or

condition from Independence to the present day—a fact that highlights both the timeliness and urgency of a study on the black diaspora in Central America.

Premise

Central American nation-states are culturally heterogeneous societies wherein designations of *de jure* and *de facto* citizens or even *de jure* and *de facto* foreigners are not always aligned. The identities of the black diaspora have been historically shaped by anthropologists, politicians, journalists, historians and Afro-Central American individuals and communities themselves. In the arena of literary fiction, canonical and non-canonical authors alike represent Central American peoples and participate in dialogues that ultimately determine the black diaspora's position in the national imaginary. The Central American intellectual tradition spans the typologies established by Ángel Rama in his groundbreaking work on the relationship of written culture and power structures in Latin American urban cultural centers—*ciudad ordenada*, *ciudad letrada*, *ciudad escrituraria*, *ciudad modernizada* and *ciudad revolucionaria*. Since the strength of the regional literary tradition depends on a collective stance to the grand narratives propagated by the nation state, we can observe parallel tendencies across nations in a given period.

As I hope to demonstrate in this study, the intellectual elites have been historically involved in the depiction of the black diaspora as a liminal citizenry with a claim to *de jure* citizenship and *de facto* foreign status regardless of whether literature expresses loyalty or dissent with the nation-state. As Ana Patricia Rodríguez observes in *Dividing the Isthmus* (2009), narratives across the region “transect and transcend national political boundaries and traverse the entire region, destabilizing not only insular and

isolationist notions of national literatures but also integrative and holistic readings of the Central American region and its cultures and peoples” (3). This study dialogues in substantive ways with different disciplines in an effort to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a central socio-cultural problematic shared by Central American countries: the reluctance of “troubling the water” in order to see blackness.

Central Argument and Project Outline

Literary discourses make manifest the ethno-linguistic and geographical divides that designate the Pacific Coast as the location of Central American-ness and its inhabitants as the “legitimate” citizens of the isthmus. My chapters treat the primary texts as documents that mark a geographical, linguistic and ethnic divide leading to the severing of Central America into three distinct areas: the *mestizo* Pacific Coast and Interior, the indigenous highlands and the black Atlantic Coast/Caribbean. While the highlands prefigure in the Central American imagination as spaces of indigenous autonomy and rebellion, black zones are excised from isthmanian national imaginaries. As the privilege of “rightful citizenship” is unequally distributed, literary and historical narratives become the vehicles that transport the intended reader to the Central American Caribbean, the site of “blackness” in the Central American intellectual imagination. Literary discourses define the black diaspora as a “liminal citizenry,” subjects who possess an uncontested citizenship status in the isthmus but are not conceived of as either the trustees or the true inheritors of national legacies. The tension between notions of rightfulness and liminality are palpable in the literature that I examine here since, being

issued in the course of critical historical junctures, they complement political discourses that serve to repeal such claims to Central American national patrimonies.

This dissertation interrogates these primary texts with attention to what is at stake for intellectuals as they engage in a project to face and to *see* blackness. Plenty of barriers have been erected in Central America to shield “rightful” citizens from the “discovery” of blackness in their own nations. These range from a lack of integration of Atlantic coastal areas into the national framework to revolutionary declarations of sameness.

Representations of blackness emerge in the form of the occasional cluster of narratives in response to catalysts that rock the core of Central American-ness. These narratives beget answers to the questions of who is Central American, who belongs in the isthmus and who *is* there.

Chapter 1 examines two travel narratives in order to demonstrate how manumission and the elimination of all but three “racial” categories in the colonial caste system set the stage for the romantic representation of blacks in Central American fiction. I study the changes that occur from the publication of Thomas Gage’s *The English American, His Travail by Sea and Land, or New Survey of the West Indies* (1648) to Jacob Haefkens’s report to the Dutch Crown, *Viaje a Guatemala y Centroamérica* (1832). I demonstrate that the possibilities for upward social mobility that were made available to free black subjects in the interim resulted in their differentiation from the indigenous populations. As the black diaspora became integral to the growth of urban centers across the Captaincy of Guatemala, they achieved a level of integration that was only possible due to their distance from the seat of power in the Viceroyalty of New

Spain. They became literate members of the *gente decente* and thus became masters of their own representations.

Chapter 2 considers the role of transnational exchanges in texts that represent black subjects and were written in the wake of the dissolution of the Federal Republic of Central America. The primary texts I work with are the poems “El porvenir” (1885), “Victor Hugo” (1885), and “Alí” (1885) written by Rubén Darío, a revolutionary in the realm of letters who spearheaded the *modernista* movement. The chapter also includes an analysis of *Júpiter* (1889), a play that depicts an emancipated slave’s role in the independence movement written by Francisco Gavidia, who is considered the father of Salvadoran letters. I argue that a passion for beauty amidst a context of troubled nation-building leads to the integration of references as varied as Greek conceptions of black beauty, British and Italian tragedies of interracial encounters, French Orientalist motifs of the African subject and Spanish images of the Moors—to name just a few of the intertextual resonances in these compositions.

Chapter 3 analyzes the anti-imperialist thrust of Paca Navas Miralda’s novel, *Barro* (1943), which takes place in the context of North American domination of Honduras’ Atlantic Coast and criticizes the United Fruit Company’s imposition in domestic affairs. A similar objective guides Aguilera Malta’s *Canal Zone* (1935), which focuses on the devastating aftereffects of the economic development brought forth by the North American Panama Canal Company. I demonstrate that while the first novel employs an anthropological gaze directed at the Garifuna and the second novel employs a social realist gaze, both narrative strategies result in a map intended to restrict black

subjects within restricted spaces. Since free circulation of blacks to the “interior” is prohibited by the modes of production that dominate these areas, the borders drawn between the two populations prevent the threat of contamination of the national core.

Chapter 4 focuses on an indigenous/black divide that is manifested in the earliest accounts of Central America and reemerges in contemporary discourse. The first text considered is *Mulata de tal* (1963), written by Miguel Ángel Asturias, an emblematic figure in Guatemala’s cultural, nationalist and modernizing debates, during his exile after the coup d’état that toppled the Jacobo Árbenz government. The second text is David Ruiz Puga’s *Got seif de cuin!* (1995), which takes place in a Maya community that has been a site of contestation for the British, Spanish, Guatemalan and Belizean governments who have alternately claimed the land and its people. I argue that the indigenous bodies in these novels bear with them a history of belonging to a pre-colonial Mesoamerica while black bodies are a synecdoche of foreign intrusion. Just as the principal black character of *Mulata de tal* lacks a “real” gender or a “real” race, so do the Creole-speaking black soldiers bearing the message of the Crown lack the “real” claim to land and place. Intellectuals who write about the Maya experience issue narratives in which such this incontestably belongs to indigenous subjects in Central America.

Finally, Chapter 5 examines two contemporary novels whose language bears the mark of neoliberal multiculturalism. Tatiana Lobo’s *Calypso* (1996) and Anacristina Rossi’s *Limón Blues* (2002) endeavor to dismantle the idea of the white Costa Rican nation by taking a look at the experiences of black characters who live in the Atlantic Coast. Both narratives rely on the strength and tenacity of black communities to

demonstrate that despite decades of marginalization, they persist and thrive. I argue that this return to the tropics and to black experience highlights the growing relevance of “political correctness” and “inclusivity” that Central America has come to use following the growing presence of international organizations in the isthmus. The aim of these rhetorical strategies is the same as those applied to Costa Rica’s war-torn neighbors: reconciling those who have suffered with those who have wielded the baton.

The Selection of Primary Texts

In selecting the texts that would form the core of this analysis, my intention was to provide a polyfaceted representation of voices addressing blackness. This led to my interest in including the works of Rubén Darío and Miguel Ángel Asturias, authors who have long been considered literary masters of Latin American literature. I also felt that it was critical to highlight the well-received contributions of younger authors whose work has not circulated beyond Central American literary circles and this brought me to the oeuvre of Anacristina Rossi, David Ruiz Puga and Tatiana Lobo. It was crucial to include Francisco Gavidia in order to call attention to the founders of the regional intellectual tradition. The texts that responded to imperialism in the twentieth century posed a challenge since, of all critical literary and socio-historical periods I engage with, this has been the most amply studied. I selected two insiders to the dynamics: Paca Navas Miralda, who is an acknowledged proponent of *costumbrismo* (the pictorial interpretation of local mannerisms and customs), and Demetrio Aguilera Malta, an Ecuadorian diplomat who not only worked in Panama for decades but also went on to write plays wherein black characters and racism had a central role. Lastly, I found it necessary to

begin with the colonial period and being aware that an edited volume exploring archival material would be published in 2010, it was important to study the travel narratives written by the perceived enemies of the Spanish Crown, the Englishman Thomas Gage and the Dutchman Jacob Haefkens. In preparing this dissertation, my intention has been to develop a manuscript driven by interdisciplinary and historical ways of thinking about ethnicity and race in the postcolonial and transnational space of Central America.

CHAPTER 1
Color-Coded Letters: Racial Passing and Discourses of Power

“Color-coding” in colonial Central America implied establishing a system of marking bodies, spaces as well as written/visual discourses with different colors as a means of identification. Leagues away from the Spanish Crown and kilometers away from the Viceroyalty of New Spain, the social landscape of the Captaincy General of Guatemala was drafted using a palette that arranged colors according to a perspective that differed significantly from that employed to sketch populations with lesser autonomy. Sightlines, imaginary lines from the eye to the object in focus, foreclosed and annulled possibilities to ascertain certain colors and yet were also at stake in throwing other colors into relief. This chapter examines how those sightlines were made manifest in travel narratives and technical writing and proposes that a reversal of the caste system in Central America, evident in these texts, allowed Afro-Central Americans themselves to hold the palette on which colors were blended with others.

In the first section, I explore the politics of intimacy between castes in the Viceroyalty of New Spain and the Captaincy General of Guatemala by drawing principally from Thomas Gage’s account of his travels between the two sites. My intention is to demonstrate that mobility between urban and rural contexts in the Captaincy General of Guatemala accelerated the process of upward mobility for Afro-Central Americans that was already evident in the two principal urban centers. In the

second section, I focus on the claim to cultural capital that enabled black scribes to assert their position as members of *populus*, with the rights and obligations hitherto only expected of *criollos* and *mestizos*. My purpose is to highlight a gradual subversion of the intellectual institutions that underscores the gradual passing of the diaspora from the category of *negro* to *moreno*, an appellation with repercussions at the rhetorical and political level. The third section examines Jacobo Haefken's account of the Central American population following independence, directing attention to the inapplicability of Enlightenment classifications of race to blacks in the nineteenth century. Through these sections, I aim to show that Afro-Central Americans became the subjects of their own representation in writings slanted towards objective representations and it was in the rhetorical strategies of fiction that they were apprehended and divested of their agency. Put differently, the color-coding system that involved monitoring the proximity of bodies within given sites became the means of overseeing how those bodies would be represented in Central American letters.

Proxemics: Color-Coded Subjects in Rural and Urban Spaces

Early attempts to capture black experience in the isthmus can be read against the grain to reveal both the authors' social imaginaries of origin, as well as the institution of a racialized social imaginary in the nascent Central American literary tradition. Though the logic of surveillance and appropriation, borrowing from the cache of techniques David Spurr calls the "rhetoric of empire," these writers carry their gaze over landscapes and penetrate private interiors marking their sovereign authority over the nature of the subjects examined. Presuming rationality and gauging the distance between themselves

and the subjects that they attempt to apprehend through representation, European writers nonetheless shed light on the shifting conditions of the socioracial order across the Central American isthmus in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In Mexico City, capital of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, color-coded urban planning was a means of designating privileges according to castes. *Criollos* demarcated an area of thirteen square blocks in the center of the city—the *traza*—and designated it as a residential area for themselves and their slaves, while the region surrounding the *traza* formed the indigenous community of San Juan Tenochtitlán (Cope 10). Neither residential segregation nor royal decrees prohibiting castes from traversing spatial boundaries to inhabit in close quarters with other castes managed to assuage *criollo* fears that indigenous groups might conspire with blacks against them. As an increasing number of *negros*, *indios*, *criollos* and their descendants mingled in the city's *zócalo*, so did the number of official writings alerting *criollos* of the danger of such encounters (Israel 57). Of utmost importance to the destiny of *criollos* was the control of the set of measureable distances between people as they interacted. The measureable physical distances between individuals, as Edward T. Hall notes in his study of proxemics, has repercussions for their level of intimacy.

The facile classification of bodies according to their color and, hence, their class had served to ensure that affective social distance between groups would ensure enmity as opposed to solidarity among groups in contrastive social spaces. Since its inception, the caste system had been a “cognitive and legal system of hierarchically arranged socioracial statuses created by the Spanish law and the colonial elite in response to the

miscegenated population in the colonies” (Chance and Taylor 460). For intellectuals like Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, the lines designating decent colonial subjects and plebeians was increasingly transgressed by groups who defiled the sanctity of spaces by crossing color lines. Miscegenation, the ultimate transgression of public and private spaces, led him to express his despair over the carnivalization of social order:

Porque siendo plebe tan en extremo plebe... por componerse de indios, de negros criollos y bozales, de chinos, de mulatos, de moriscos, de mestizos, de zambaigos, de lobos y también de españoles que, en declarándose zaramullos (que es lo mismo que pícaros, chulos y arrebatacapas), y degenerando en sus obligaciones son los peores entre tan ruin canallada. (Sigüenza y Góngora 113)

Sigüenza y Góngora easily lists the castes that comprise the plebeians in his city, spanning the gamut of the racial mixtures that associate the subject with an African heritage. The terms *negros criollos* and *bozales*, for instance, refer to black slaves who were born in New Spain in the case of the former and on the African continent in the case of the latter. *Mulattos* claimed half Spanish and African ancestry while *moriscos*, or quadroons, a quarter African and three-fourths Spanish. *Lobos* were the progeny of an African and an indigenous subject, while *chinos* were the fruit of a union between a *lobo* and an indigenous partner. Indeed, such was the indeterminacy of racial compositions that the term *zambaigo* was often used interchangeably with *lobo* or *chino* when designating an individual's caste. Of particular interest is the inclusion of *indios*, *mestizos* and *españoles* that Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora includes in his listing of the riffraff in this urban context. The ground is leveled for these Spaniards who have ceased to follow

the rules of the established gentry and have lowered themselves by becoming affected, conceited, finicky, foolish and all the other synonyms for the term *zaramullo*.

While location was instrumental in describing places physically distant from the city—the rural areas which in the seventeenth century were socially close to the core of the city—it was the social distances between castes which had become difficult to delineate in the urban colonial imaginary. The caste system had allowed *criollos* to avoid being associated with “tainted” blood in order to reinforce their sense of exclusivity, but by the seventeenth century the urban society divided itself into two categories: *gente decente* (respectable people) and *plebe* (plebeians) (Cope 22). It was a society in which the distribution of wealth had permitted the blacks to contribute to and benefit from the colonial economy: “castas with buying power daily flouted Spanish sumptuary regulations” (Cope 22). Though black women and mulattas, for instance, faced confiscation of their property if they wore golden jewelry, pearls or full-length embroidered *mantas*, affluence across classes had begun to erode the old distinction between Spaniards and castas. Compelled to denounce the loss of public distance and the burgeoning intimacy between castes, Sigüenza y Góngora captured a subtle change in the rubrics of color-coded spaces in urban colonial society that was likewise alluded to by Thomas Gage in his 1648 text, *The English American, His Travail by Sea and Land, or New Survey of the West Indias*.

This travel narrative is an ambitious project that chronicles the author’s voyage from Europe to New Spain, the twelve years he spent living among indigenous peoples in Guatemala, and his return to England through present-day Nicaragua, Costa Rica,

Panama, Colombia and Cuba. It was accompanied by a map and was, as stated on the title page, “A new and exact discovery of the Spanish navigation to those parts; and of their dominions, government, religion, forts, castles, ports, havens, commodities, fashions, behavior of Spaniards, priests and friars, blackmores, mulattos, mestisos, Indians, and of their feasts and solemnities” (Aguilar XV). Indeed, Gage had two objectives upon publishing his memoirs of Mexico and Central America: “to point out the weakness of Spanish power in New Spain with the objective of encouraging the English to invade and plant colonies; and to ingratiate himself with the ascendant Puritans in England by demonstrating his complete rejection of both Catholicism and Anglicanism” (Ganyard 135). Gage’s account directly contributed to the growth of the “black legend” against New Spain and served the English Crown in its endeavor to amass possessions in the Spanish territories. The weight of the text was not lost upon the Guatemalan critic Sinforoso Aguilar who cautioned his readership against a faithful reading of the text, arguing in his 1946 prologue that it reproduces “las exageraciones del otro dominico, Fray Bartolomé, a propósito de las crueldades de los españoles” (Aguilar XIV). The controversy over the veracity of Gage’s account highlights its importance for, as the H. Dodwell states, “his work is undeniably vigorous. Gage was not merely a treacherous rascal, but also a shrewd observer and effective writer” (665). Furthermore, this chapter demonstrates, one cannot underestimate the account’s value as a text that documents the decline of the rigid caste system and localizes black subjects across social classes in urban and rural Guatemalan contexts.

That their purchasing power allowed blacks, mulattos and their descendants to flaunt their wealth and transgress the rigid categories established by the caste system captivated colonial artists and Thomas Gage alike. Turning his gaze to the mulattas of the capital of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, Gage observes, “Hasta las negras y las esclavas tienen sus joyas, y no hay una que salga sin su collar y brazaletes o pulseras de perlas, y sus pendientes con alguna piedra preciosa” (Gage 76). He describes the long, silky, flowing sleeves made from fabric imported from Holland or China, their tiaras, their linen, cambrai or silk shawls and, finally, their high-heeled shoes with silver toes. Gage is dubious about these adornments and concludes that, “la mayor parte de esas mozas son esclavas, o lo han sido antes, y el amor les ha dado la libertad para encadenar las almas y sujetarlas al yugo del pecado y del demonio” (77). The black women dress lasciviously, states Gage, “y sus ademanes y donaire tan embelesadores, que hay muchos españoles, aún entre los de la primera clase, que por ellas dejan a sus mujeres” (76). The fine silks, gold and silver accessories, pearls and precious stones that adorn their bodices are gifts from the male gentry who become involved with them. These sexual and romantic affiliations raise black women’s worth and defy color-coding conventions embedded in the institution of marriage among the upper classes.

Further along in his account, Gage bridges the gap between Mexico City and Santiago de los Caballeros¹ in Guatemala, stressing the decadence of the inhabitants of both major colonial centers. Abundance and riches have made both populations prideful,

¹ Santiago de Caballeros was established in 1543 as the third capital of the Kingdom of Guatemala. An earthquake devastated the architecture of the city in 1717 but it was not until 1773 after the Santa Marta earthquake that royal officials agreed to move the capital a fourth time. The new capital as established in present day Guatemala City in 1776 and the previous capital, Santiago de Caballeros, became thereafter known as “Antigua Guatemala.”

immoral and with a predilection to corrupt activities. Simile and metaphor are employed in Gage's condemnation of "plebian women" who engage in prostitution in a city, which like the capital of the Viceroyalty enjoy unlimited privileges. According to Gage, the shameful consequences of such licentious behaviors are that:

Las mulatas, las negras, las mestizas, las indias y las demás mujeres y jóvenes de baja condición son muy amadas y buscadas por los ricos. Están vestidas con tanto aseo como las de México y no son menos lúbricas que ellas, a pesar de que estas viven entre las montañas que las amenazan con la ruina y el castigo. (Gage 183)

While prostitution increased dramatically in the nineteenth century in tandem with the growth of agro-export economies, the social stratification underlying the commercialization of sex were already in place in the early seventeenth century. By the time of Gage's travels through Santiago de Caballeros, the city was experiencing unprecedented but unstable economic prosperity, urbanization and social disorganization. Attempts to regulate prostitution assumed the character of a liberal drive to mobilize and control society in the interest of a class-defined vision of national development (McCreery 334). In marked contrast, transactions involving sexual favors in late seventeenth century Santiago de Caballeros were an extension of the surplus wealth enjoyed by the Captaincy General of Guatemala.

Such was the opulence throughout the principal urban areas across New Spain that lavish attire and adornments were worn by members of specific racial groups, as were even depicted in the *casta* painting sets attributed to Manuel Arellano (Figure 2). While *mulattos* did not enjoy an official high status in the caste system, Ilona Katzew



Figure 2: Manuel Arellano, *Rendition of a Mulatto*, 1711.

observes, the fact that these painters individualize these racial castes is significant because it is closely related to the artists' desire to project an image of splendor in New Spain, which included even those that Europeans abroad perceived to be at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy (Katzew 70). Visual and written discourses served to locate bodies in the color-coded spaces of urban societies and, significantly, provided a gendered representation of those bodies reflecting opportunities for upward social mobility. Among the white urban elites and the aspirant landed bourgeoisie, rules of etiquette dictated that the ladies of these social classes be accompanied by a servant or other companion upon leaving her home. As a consequence, women from the socially designated "inferior" castes and colors enjoyed visibility in public urban spaces.

Literary and artistic representation was a cathartic project for *gente decente* to the extent that it provided a response to the propinquity effect they observed, the tendency to form alliances and relationships with those whom they encounter most often. The ever-decreasing intimate distances between black subjects and urbanites of various colors was perceived as a social malady: heteroclite. Following the definition provided by Michel Foucault, the term refers to "the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in their dimension, without law or geometry" in such a state that "things are 'laid,' 'placed,' 'arranged' in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them, to define a *common locus* beneath them all" (Foucault xvii). As sizeable black populations developed in provinces like San Salvador and Guatemala, *criollos* lobbied for a reduction of the slave

trade into their territories towards 1640. In rural and urban contexts, black subjects played economic roles that voided the institution of slavery.

Black slave imports remained low for decades but, as Paul Lokken observes, slave driven sugar-production lost none of its vitality in the rural areas where it was largely under the direction of the Dominican, Jesuit, Mercedarian and Augustinian orders (36). In stark contrast to Cuba where black labor fueled the plantation economy, slaves of African origin often found themselves in the position of supervising indigenous workers on these rural estates. Given that these enslaved overseers were responsible for “extracting maximum amount of labor from their charges, repartimiento laborers complained bitterly about them” (Lokken 43). Spaniards likewise relied on Africans and their descendants to control indigenous subjects in many ways, including the policing of their religious practices. By the mid-seventeenth century, the number of mulattos, zambos and their descendants had multiplied exponentially and had become well integrated in colonial urban society. They were primarily craftsmen who were subject to the *laborío* tribute and other legal and social disabilities imposed by Spaniards who endeavored to maintain divisions of color and origin even as these were increasingly outdated. The call for an end to black slave trafficking was not a humanistic effort. In order to preserve new social order, it was necessary to rearrange the sightlines that demarcated colors in the changing economies of a society that both literary and artistic discourses were capturing.

Gage’s text highlights the permeability of urban spaces, which are not safe from the uprisings instigated by a significant number of “negros desesperados y esclavos” who have left the indigo plantations in the rural areas and who, bearing nothing but machetes,

are nonetheless “tan desesperados, que muchas veces han causado alarmas a la ciudad de Guatemala, y se han hecho temer de sus mismos amos. Algunos de ellos no temen hacer frente al toro más salvaje, por furioso que esté, y de atacar los cocodrilos en los ríos, hasta matarlos y traerlos a tierra” (Gage 184). Context and hyperbole are important in Gage’s rendition of black slaves’ fearlessness since Gage’s emphasis on their arrival in the urban scene is a warning that slaves encountered in the urban context pose the greatest threat to social order. The city itself acts as a catalyst for confrontations between slaves and their white masters in much the same way that it was a detonator for the sexual trysts between white gentlemen and young mulattas partaking in urban wealth and excess.

Gage is neither opposed to African slavery nor the existence of a free black population in the city. His narrative provides an image of increasingly blurred definitions between the social spaces designated for bodies of different colors and the implications of this dissolution of boundaries on the designation of plebian/gentry circles in the urban scene. For this reason, the *hacendados* in rural contexts that garner Gage’s disapproval are “gentes rústicas y groseras” who are not worthy of being considered gentlemen. By the seventeenth century the countryside had become an important arena for shaping creole identity, no less than the mendicant priories (Megged 431). A demographic movement from the important centers of the Captaincy had begun in the 1560s and those creole farmers and merchants who lived among indigenous, mestizos, mulattos and black slaves nearly thirty or forty years later, regarded sharing social spaces as permanent and

natural (Megged 434). While urban planning was dependent on color-coding spaces, the utility of this practice in a rural context was rendered obsolete.

An exemplary case was Juan Palomeque who, according to Gage, was a slave to his riches and owned over three hundred mules and about a hundred slaves while living in the Mixco valley. This *hacendado* had forgone the privileges of other men equal in wealth in the city, where it would have been necessary to imitate their behavior in order to preserve his reputation. Yet, “este miserable avaro que conocía bien las ventajas de la economía, escogió para su residencia el campo en lugar de la ciudad, una cabaña por una buena casa, la compañía de negros y esclavos en vez de la gente decente, y no obstante se le calculaban seiscientos mil pesos de caudal” (Gage 189). Juan Palomeque was a paradox for Gage, who wondered why a man who owned property in the city would fashion a home and life for himself that was only fit for a slave:

La casa misma en que él vivía era cubierta de paja, donde tenía mayor placer de habitar que en las que poseía en Guatemala; porque allí vivía como salvaje en medio de sus negros y esclavos y en la ciudad estaría obligado a vivir civilmente. Allí se contentaba de comer leche o cuajado, con pan negro, duro y mohoso, y tasajo, que son unas rebanadas de carne de buey muy delgadas y muy saladas y secas al aire y sol, lo que acostumbran sus esclavos llevar para comer en el camino cuando iban al Golfo. (Gage 189)

Gage assures the reader that Palomeque felt stifled by city life, which would have prevented him from amassing a fortune by demanding conspicuous consumption on the comforts of civility. Furthermore, Gage observes that the man was partial to sexual

promiscuity and his own ire, and was ruthless in financial affairs—assuming almost a monopoly in the trade to the Gulf because the number of slaves and mules he owned guaranteed him the transport of goods at a lower cost—and brought ruin to his competitors. Gage’s estimation was that Palomeque thrived on his savagery, which was made manifest in his brutal treatment of his slaves and in his lasciviousness: “Era tan sensual y lúbrico que abusaba a su gusto de las mujeres de sus esclavos. Lo mismo hacía con las que de esta clase había en la ciudad, casadas o solteras, si eran de su gusto” (Gage 189). To Gage, these transgressions of color-coded spaces heralded grave consequences, a matter that was seemingly proven when Palomeque died and his progeny dismantled the wealth he had so jealously guarded. There emerged from the valley, Gage states, “bastardos de todos colores, quienes después de la muerte de este malvado, disiparán las riquezas que ha acumulado a fuerza de avaricia y crueldad” (Gage 189). Gage does not denounce Palomeque’s position as a slave master, but rather the *excesses* that accompany the behavior that diminishes the distance between white and black subjects on the plantation.

In fact, the constant convergence of color-coded spaces between colonial subjects in rural areas was a feature of the institution of slavery in Central America. Slavery itself and the slave trade by extension were legal throughout the isthmus but as finance dictated the need for forced labor, it was most entrenched in the Captaincy of Guatemala and the Atlantic Coast in particular. Planters in these zones requested slaves for domestic service, the cultivation of indigo and sugar, silver mining, road and ship building and dock work; officers of the regular army and militia petitioned for slaves to serve as footmen and

valets (Fiehrer 40). Even though the trade was officially ceased in 1639, it was reestablished in 1664 after Central American planters observed how profits from the contraband slave trade encouraged English indigo cultivation and dyewood industries out of the Misquito Coast (Fiehrer 40). Writing his account in 1648, allows Gage to present a clearly antithetical approach to color-coded spaces in the countryside. Proxemics ensured the wealth and productivity of the Agustinians who owned a sugar mill, of Pedro Crespo who owned the largest sugar mill in Amatitlán and Sebastián Zavaletas. Of this last individual, Gage adds that Zavaletas masterfully navigates his social spaces: “por lo regular se encuentran en su hacienda, sesenta esclavos y da en su casa buenas comidas, lo que le hace pasar por generoso y magnífico; así es que se dice que posee a lo menos quinientos mil ducados” (Gage 192). Gage is primarily interested evaluating the degree to which the British may take advantage of the weakened social fabric resulting from both the fixation on color-coded spaces and their transgressions by colonial subjects. Gage considers the implications these actions may have in the area of territorial security.

Gage establishes that a foreign army could easily conquer the Captaincy General of Guatemala if only because the indigenous populations could easily forge an uprising of their own accord or even join forces with foreigners in an effort to overthrow the Spaniards who have mistreated them. Gage hesitates to target the autochthonous groups as the sole instigators of such revolts and adds that “si a todo esto se agrega el que los negros e indios, que han sido tan maltratados, y que por eso han aprendido siempre algo, se juntan con los extranjeros, claro está que los españoles no podrán evitar su ruina, estando atacados al mismo tiempo por dentro y por fuera” (Gage 200). Instead of

instilling in their slaves a sentiment of dependence, the Spanish have weakened their control and would be unable to assemble a troop of five thousand to stave off attack. Furthermore, they have left their ports and entries unattended. Gage is certain that Guatemalan slaves would easily join forces with the British in order to gain their liberty, “prefiriendo más bien vivir en libertad bajo la dominación de un pueblo extranjero, que ser por más largo tiempo oprimidos por los de su misma nación” (Gage 201). The finest reference to the cooptability of the slave populations is in Gage’s reference to a community of runaway slaves that has already manifested itself as a formidable threat to the Spanish. Traversing the mountains has been an arduous task given the presence of:

Dos o trescientos negros cimarrones que se han escapado de Guatemala y otros lugares por los malos tratamientos que recibían, habiendo abandonado a sus amos para retirarse en estos bosques donde viven con sus mujeres e hijos, y se aumenta todos los días el número; de suerte que todo el poder de Guatemala y contornos no es capaz de sujetarlos.

[...]

Muchas veces salen de los bosques para atacar a los arrieros; robándoles el vino, sal, vestidos y las armas de que carecen; jamás hacen mal alguno a los arrieros ni a los esclavos que los siguen, al contrario, éstos se alegran mucho de encontrarlos porque son de un mismo color y se hallan en el mismo estado de servidumbre: muchas veces esto les sirve de ocasión para seguir su ejemplo, y se unen a ellos para hacerse libres, aunque se vean obligados a vivir en los bosques y las montañas. Sus armas son las flechas y el arco para defenderse en el caso de ser

atacados por los españoles; porque no hacen mal a los viajeros pacíficos y que les dan una parte de sus víveres. (Gage 186)

Gage reports that they have encouraged other slaves to join their ranks, indicating that their collaboration with the British on the basis of a common enemy—the *criollos*—would be a straightforward endeavor.

Evoking the segment of the Triangular Trade that involved the British arriving on the West African Coast with manufactured goods later bartered in exchange for black slaves, Gage argues that the British should endeavor to secure the sympathy of the runaway slaves by providing the community with provisions. Gage alerts the reader that their numbers are rising and that they have attained weapons and are capable of using them and, by keeping this small military in reserve for future use, the Spanish could be overthrown. Gage ensures that his account is accurate: “Ellos mismos han dicho repetidas veces que la causa principal de haberse refugiado en estas montañas era la de estar dispuestos a unirse a los ingleses y los holandeses, si algún día éstos tomaban tierra en el golfo, porque sabían muy bien que serían libres siendo así que con los españoles no lo serán nunca más” (Gage 186). Observing that the Spanish and indigenous groups were armed with little more than bows and arrows and possessed only twenty muskets in Acarabastlán, Gage paints a portrait of a community that is doomed to be defeated upon the collaboration of the British fleets and the black *cimarrones*—a contingent that is not bound to be placated. What Gage witnesses in his survey of colonial black subjects in the Captaincy General of Guatemala is the gradual transition of the black population into different echelons of colonial society through their integration of color-coded spaces in

both rural and urban contexts. In this territory so far removed from the urban centers of colonial trade, it was possible for runaway to live in relative autonomy. Their frequent interactions with the Garifuna and the Miskitu, both Afro-indigenous communities, made these connections exceptional. Karl H. Offen indicates that in the case of the latter community, “the reasons for this exceptionalism include the precarious location of British settlements in relation to Spanish forts and settlements, the relative lack of plantation agriculture, the labor requirements of far-flung extractive enterprises, the preponderance of mixed-raced peoples, and the domineering presence of the Mosquito people” (120). At the crossroads of two warring empires, these afro-indigenous groups and their runaway slave allies governed themselves, interacted with the British and the Spanish as equals and traded with Europeans according to what was in their best interest. In short, ideas about color and difference developed in a special manner in these Atlantic zones.

While Gage’s intention was to signal to an English and, possibly, Dutch readership the different elements that weakened Spanish power in the Americas, his account allows the contemporary reader to gain insight into the economic conditions that allowed the black diaspora in Central America to aspire and achieve upward social mobility. As a matter of particular interest, Gage mentions the possibility that a rich black man, a former slave, in Agua Caliente, may have been able to purchase his liberty and maintain his lifestyle due to a treasure he may have found:

En este lugar en Agua Caliente, hay un negro que vive en una hacienda que le pertenece, pasa por muy rico, y recibe muy bien a los que visitan. Su riqueza

consiste en Ganado mayor, cabras y ovejas, surtiendo la ciudad de Guatemala y sus contornos del mejor queso que se encuentra en este país.

Generalmente se piensa que sus riquezas no provienen tanto de su renta, Ganado y excelentes quesos, cuanto de este tesoro oculto que dicen serle conocido, y que él es el solo que sabe dónde está; por esto se le ha hecho ir a la Audiencia real de Guatemala; pero ha negado siempre conocerlo. Se había sospechado de él, por haber sido esclavo en otro tiempo y haberse rescatado pagando una fuerte suma; y porque después de haberse visto libre, había comprado esta hacienda y muchas tierras anexas, y aumentado considerablemente los fondos con que había comenzado: a lo cual él respondió que siendo joven y todavía esclavo tenía buen amo, que le dejaba hacer su voluntad, y que siendo muy económico había juntado con qué recobrar su libertad y además una casita para vivir; que Dios lo había favorecido y le había dado los medios de aumentar su caudal. (Gage 188)

Gage's account serves to remind his intended readers that the black subjects' increasing access to hitherto prohibited spaces reflects an inability to restrict private spaces and access to wealth. While they are incapable of locating the treasure, this former slave may have gained access to it and is so industrious that he has become one of the wealthiest men in Agua Caliente. He is known as a dutiful host, who admits visitors and is not shy about having to account for his wealth when questioned by authorities. He may very well be the wealthiest man in this territory but, as Gage demonstrates, he is not the only recently freed black man to have made his way in free society. Along the banks of the

river Vacas, there are poor inhabitants of all colors who imagine their children reaching the highest echelons of society:

En sus márgenes [del río Vacas] existen varios habitantes pobres la mayor parte mestizos y mulatos y viven en casas cubiertas de paja donde crían algún ganado; la mayor parte de su tiempo lo emplean en buscar arena que contenga oro, imaginándose que ellos o sus hijos serán ricos algún día, y que el río de Vacas podría igualarse al *Pactolo olo* y obligar a los poetas a hacerle tan famoso en sus versos, como lo han hecho otras veces con este último. (Gage 188)

His imperial interests notwithstanding, Gage's observations highlight a conception of identity already forged by free blacks in the late seventeenth century. It was an idea that critics today recognize as neither transparent nor unproblematic. The performance of blackness across historical periods, and in particular Gage's representations of the same in the colonial period, bring to bear the claim that it is appropriate to think of identity "as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, 'cultural identity,' lays claim" (Hall 222). The slippage of racial identity to the forces of political, economic and social framework allows us to examine black identity in the rural and urban contexts of the Captaincy General of Guatemala as a process replete with discontinuities.

Identity positions, according to Stuart Hall, are strategic and arbitrary because there are no permanent equivalences between identifications established across time. As the passages from Thomas Gage cited above indicate, free blacks in Central America

were already identifying with the cultural hegemony of the colonial system. Officially bound to the lowest social strata, the historical context allowed mulattos and their descendants to free themselves from the shackles that had bound their slave ancestors and participate as free laborers in the economic activities of creole urban and rural sectors. Financial autonomy guaranteed social autonomy. Participation in the public sphere ensured the black diaspora's seamless racial passing and their mastery of the discourses of representation.

Colors: The Effrontery of the Pen

The pride of blacks and their sense of superiority vis-à-vis indigenous groups in the region had become notorious by the end of the seventeenth century, as *morenos* attained prized positions and privileges forbidden to the indigenous populace. Blurring the color line between *morenos* and *mestizos* implied justifying in writing why the former racial category should be eliminated in church registries. According to the inventory of traits listed by the intendant² of El Salvador, *morenos* merited the status of *mestizo* due to: their total acceptance of Spanish hegemony, the ease with which they attached themselves to Spaniards, their lively character and the ease with which they formed unions with lower-class Europeans (Gutiérrez Ulloa 11). These factors had a direct relationship to the mulatto population's upward mobility across the isthmus. Antonio Gramsci's understanding of black subjectivity is particularly useful for analyzing this historical moment, particularly in the manner that he qualifies subalternity. According to

² *Intendentes* were introduced in New Spain after the Bourbon reforms. They were appointed by the Crown and were primary responsible for overseeing fiscal matters in their respective *intendencias*, which could include several provinces.

Gramsci, the absolute exclusion of indigenous peoples from the hegemonic system means that they cannot be conceived as a subaltern group. In contrast, the particularities of black experience suggest that *morenos* accept and benefit from, to a certain extent, white colonial hegemony.

Such was the need for scribes in the farthest provinces of the isthmus that mulattos had not been excluded due to their parentage. This was a true affront to the control of the written word by *criollos* in earlier centuries of Spanish control over the isthmus and even in other Spanish colonies in the same period. Emerging from the Latin words *scriba* and *scribere*—both shortened forms of *describere*—the importance of a position that allowed *morenos* to become involved with record keeping should not be overlooked. As more *morenos* became scribes, Spanish officials brought the matter to the attention of the King, as *Licenciado* Alonso Fernández did so in 1622:

No hay en [Panamá] hijo de vecino que se aplique a oficio tan honroso y de fidelidad como el de escribaño y que los escritorios están llenos de mulatos pendolarios que, sin embargo, de la cédula perseveran en que han de ser escribanos. Los españoles que tienen títulos están ofendidos con tales compañeros y no usan los oficios sino a más no poder y algunos lo han dejado (quoted in Castillero Calvo 83).

This was an honorable and coveted profession requiring a degree of exactness and knowledge of the language that had hitherto been associated with *vecinos* of good standing, otherwise known as Spaniards. Despite the few precedents, *morenos* in this period could aspire to hold the position of scribes and they did so in large numbers,

filling the vacancies left by *criollos*. Within due time, these “mulatos pendolarios” became associated with the profession and gained the power of the “written word,” consequently ensuring a space for mulattos in colonial society. This new direction was prompted by the Spanish Crown in response to the perceived needs of the provinces farthest removed from the seat of power: Pedro de la Cueva, *fiscal de la audiencia*, declared in 1620:

Se han tenido hace algunos años títulos de escribaño real por el Consejo [de Indias] a algunas personas de poca satisfacción por ser mulatos y mestizos, y no es possible sino que no se hace verdadera relación de las personas para quienes se piden, porque de mulatos ni de mestizos no se pueden fiar negocios de tanta fidelidad y confianza y estos señores cuando acá los examinan no tratan de calidad de sus personas sino solo si se entienden algunos de su oficio y con esto los despachan bien. (quoted in Castellero Calvo 84)

Notions of lineage and aptitude had met their limits, causing the local elite to become wary of an impending social order that did not call attention to a black subject’s family heritage. What had begun to matter most in these remote places was whether or not the mulatto scribe could perform in a manner appropriate to the task bestowed upon him and not how his admittance might taint this hitherto white space of privilege.

As the emergence of *morenos* across different social strata and demise of the practice of “color-coding” public and private spaces imply, the Captaincy of Guatemala found itself on the brink of a far-reaching reorganization of social categories in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Following Michel Foucault’s observations in *The*

Order of Things, it is interesting to consider the accepted truths underlying the standards of acceptability in early seventeenth century Captaincy General of Guatemala. Prior to the intrusion of positivism, the “truth” about a subject’s social position lay in his *calidad* and *clase*. In the period in question, *calidad* referred to the individual’s classification as *negro*, *indio*, *español*, and so forth, while *clase* referred to occupational standing that nonetheless included dimensions of wealth (McCaa 478). While purity of blood, honor, integrity and even place of birth were perceived as integral factors considered in calculating one’s *calidad*, the episteme at the root of the term was in transition. The Captaincy General of Guatemala’s geographic location and its peripheral standing when compared to the urban centers of the Viceroyalties of Spain and Peru were factors that contributed to less stringent conceptions of *calidad*. Furthermore, black subjects themselves had begun to perceive the possibilities of legally refuting their *calidad* on the basis of their *clase*. These divergent sight lines from the seat of power and from black individuals themselves resulted in “systems of simultaneity” and a “series of mutations necessary to circumscribe the new threshold of a new positivity” that, following Foucault, are fruitful in this study of blackness. The point of interest here, as Foucault reminds us, is the middle ground wherein a culture experiences the propinquity of things and establishes the *tabula* of their relationships and the order by which they must be considered (xxiv).

The *morenos*’ linguistic prowess ensured their acceptance by the small colonial elite insofar as their *calidad* was difficult to ascertain as they “passed” into the color-coded spaces that had until then been reserved for privileged subjects. As a petition

submitted in 1627 by Manuel Botacio Grillo, an aspiring scribe, made clear: [he was] “horro libre no sujeto a cautiverio alguno, por ser hijo de español y de la dicha Mariana Sánchez, morena libre y no sujeta a la esclavitud” (quoted in Castellero Calvo 84). As was customary, his petition included letters from witnesses—Spaniards—who assured that Grillo had an illustrious parentage, one of the 28 Patrician Genovese families, and that he was a virtuous man, faithful and fearful of God apart from being “de moderado color, no obstante que es mulato” (quoted in Castellero Calvo 85). In support of Grillo’s case, the *Licenciado* Fernando Saavedra of the Consejo de Indias provided a list of precedents in order to demonstrate that this would not be the first time that a mulatto was granted a notary title. The notary title was officially bestowed upon Grillo in 1650, when he finished paying the 2,000 silver *reales* that granted him dismissal from his condition as a mulatto. Being able to “pass” for white was an asset in a context where Grillo’s piety, lineage and skill were already enviable qualities.

In a brilliant examination of “passing,” Elaine K. Ginsburg asserts that it “is about identities: their creation and imposition, their adoption and rejection, their accompanying rewards and penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established by between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing. Finally, passing is about specularity: the visible and the invisible, the seen and unseen” (2). Black subjects in North America who passed as white capitalized on a physical appearance emphasizing “white” features and were enabled in their endeavor by their decision to relocate to a place where their legal identity could not be ascertained (Ginsburg 4). In striking contrast, black subjects in the Captaincy General of Guatemala

were able to pass for white by grace of their phenotype and their permanence in the peripheries of the Spanish colonies. Rewards were reaped in professional matters, cultural anxieties were mitigated by the Consejo de Indias' increasingly common practice of granting privileges to subjects with known black ancestry and the specular tricks involved in amassing witnesses to attest to black subject's compliance with the hegemony.

A petition for a notary title from Juan Martínez de Leguizamo in 1660 includes testimony from two Spaniards who declare that he enjoyed a good life, reputation and habits, despite having “de defecto de su persona el tener mezcla de mulatto, si bien el color de su rostro lo disimula más de lo ordinario” (quoted in Castellero Calvo 86). Passing for white was an indispensable detail in a case involving a man who was the product of a legitimate union and whose parentage consisted of “cristianos viejos, limpios de toda mala raza de judíos, ensambenitados, ni de los nuevamente convertidos a nuestra fe” (quoted in Castellero Calvo 86). His close connection to God, established by his Christian lineage, trumped the fact that he was a quadroon—son of a mulatta and a Spaniard. An important “fact” was that his lineage had not been muddled by traces of the newly converted indigenous peoples or zambos—those of mixed African and Indigenous ancestry—who had no hopes of “improving” their blood. The only matter counting against Leguizamo was the fact that one quarter of his blood was black. All the rest paved the way for a life and profession that seventy five percent of his blood allowed him to lay claim to. As his instructor stated, “es de los mejores escribanos de letra que tiene todo este reino y hábil y capáz, y que sabe ordenar todos y cualquiera escritura, testamento y

contrato, porque [...] ha asistido en el despacho de oficios públicos y reales, de donde salió bastante capáz” (quoted in Castellero Calvo 86-87). Thus, after paying 100 silver *ducados* to conceal his color, Martínez de Leguizamo obtained the coveted title of notary.

Though sightlines were adjusted through the “*vía de disimulación*,” not all mulattos who aspired to bureaucratic positions obtained them and they were not always without a reprisal. An illustrious military record, piety, wealth and a fine reputation could grant mulattos the right to own stores, build walls in the interior of their homes, and even exercise the right to wear powdered wigs (Castillero Calvo 94). The heterogeneous nature of urban spaces ensured that the same process of “passing” would repeat itself across the major ports and cultural centers in the isthmus including the capital of the Captaincy, where *morenos* occupied positions fully integrated in the mercantilist mode of production as merchants, artisans, shoemakers, locksmiths, bakers, ironsmiths, barber-surgeons, masons and militiamen (Lokken and Lutz 27). *Morenos* had attained a measure of prominence through their ascension into positions as scribes, notaries, soldiers, and priests—given that the number of white men in these professions had declined, leaving vacancies—yet these rights and privileges had not been conceded without attention to the consequences in rural areas: “Que no conviene fomentar que los pardos se hagan letrados dejando la agricultura y el comercio que son ejercicios más análogos a su condición y de mayor utilidad privada y pública” (quoted in Castellero Calvo 94). The matter was settled discursively as it became evident that the *moreno*’s ascension into spaces of privilege would not have repercussions on the permanence of indigenous peoples in rural contexts—these became coded as fit for *indios*.

Casta paintings illustrated an idea of “blood-mending” that seemed to favor subjects of indigenous descent who chose white partners—Spaniard and Indian, Mestizo; Spaniard and Mestizo, Castizo; Spaniard and Castizo, Spaniard—and condemned subjects of African heritage—Spaniard and Black, Mulatto; Spaniard and Mulatto, Morisco; Spaniard and Morisco, *Tornatrás*—to endless blackness (Figures 3-5). The Curse of Ham, used to justify black slavery, also served to explain the *de jure* inferiority of black subjects vis-à-vis white subjects after the institution of slavery had ceased to be important in the Captaincy General of Guatemala.

The Curse of Ham was purportedly justified by a passage in the book of Genesis. Noah became a husbandman, planted a vineyard and drank from that wine. He lay uncovered in a state of drunkenness when his son, Ham, entered the tent and saw the nakedness of his father. Upon telling his brothers, they enter the tent with their backs turned toward the nakedness of the their father and cover him without stealing a glance. Upon awakening from his drunkenness, Noah found out what had happened. According to the Revised Standard Version, the father’s curse reads thus: And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son [Ham] had done unto him. And he said, “Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be unto his brothers.” He also said, “Blessed by the Lord be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave” (Gen 9:18-27). There are readily evident difficulties with the interpretation of this text since, including the fact that Ham sinned but it was his son Canaan who was punished. Furthermore, the passage does not indicate that either Ham or his son Canaan was dark-skinned, much less of African origin. Yet



Figure 3: Miguel Cabrera, 4. *De español y negra, mulata* (From Spaniard and Black, Mulatto), 1763.



Figure 4: Miguel Cabrera, 5. *De español y mulatta, morisca* (From Spaniard and Mulatta, Morisca), 1763.



Figure 5: Miguel Cabrera, 7. *De español y albina, torna atrás* (From Spaniard and Albino, Return-Backwards, 1763).

witnessing the father's drunken nakedness implies seeing "the truth" and by fully knowing the father, being able to judge him. As religious convictions were largely unchallenged until the Age of Enlightenment, the presumptions of the Curse of Ham were undisputed until critics appealed to other foundational "truths" for the basis of black inferiority. It is a religious allusion that is referenced in Rubén Darío's poetry, to which we will return in the next chapter. For the moment, I'd like to indicate how these ideas became known in New Spain.

Juan de Torquemada was a Franciscan friar and historian whose monumental history of the indigenous peoples in New Spain, *Monarquía Indiana* (1615), was largely based on the oral histories of the Totonac (present-day Veracruz, Mexico), Pipil (in present-day El Salvador) and Nicoya (in present-day Costa Rica). In his landmark text, Torquemada layered these accounts with his own observations of colonial subjects. Of interest to this analysis is the manner in which he looked to the Curse of Ham to justify the widely promoted inferiority of blacks in the caste system. According to the friar, Ham's son begot children who "nacieron negros, y feos, como los Egipcios, y Getulos, Gente barbara, que viven, en una Region en lo interior de Libia...que son Negros, como carbon, y tienen la boca podrida" (Torquemada 569). Climate and the power of maternal imagination were both posited by intellectuals of the period as explanations for blackness, but the Curse of Ham became entrenched in New World imaginaries justifying the bleak destinies of black subjects.

This religious conjecture was challenged by Immanuel Kant in 1764, replacing it with a theory of climate as the determining factor of color and intelligence: "it is the heat

of the area—rather than a particular set of parents—that causes blackness as can be seen by the fact that in the same country [Africa] those that live in the flat parts are far blacker than those that live in the high altitudes” (Kant 62). His review of blacks depicted in Father Jean-Baptiste Labat’s chronicles echoes that of Friedrich Hegel’s admission that although a black physician in Brazil was responsible for acquainting Europeans with quinine, the “characteristic feature of the Negroes is that their consciousness has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial objectivity—for example, of God or the law—in which the will of man could participate and in which he could become aware of his own being” (Hegel 127). The travel narratives that had reached Europe denounced the atrocities committed by colonizers and *criollos* alike without critically examining—so it would seem—blackness.

While the indigenous subject was tokenized and then displayed, sketched, painted, described and embalmed, the *moreno* subject’s experience exceeded the complex system of representation. An observation made by Stephen Greenblatt in *Marvelous Possessions* is appropriate at this juncture: the Eurocentric dream of possessing the other rests on a form of witnessing understood as “significant” and “representative”; the act of *seeing* and the witness himself become a point of contact that mediates between the reader and that which is beyond the reader’s point of view (122). Travel writings bases its historical authority on the subject they represent by exploiting the affective response of a reader before a figure situated at the institutional and moral core of the culture described. Traveler and reader, on a common quest for appropriation of the other, engage in a path “through identification to complete estrangement: for a moment you see yourself

confounded with the other, but then you make the other become an alien object, a thing, that you destroy and incorporate at will” (Greenblatt 135). In registries and travel narratives, indigenous subjects pass through the sieve and are apprehended; black subjects pass through the sieve and remain the imperceptible, ever illusive subjects rendered invisible through their own force of will.

Intermezzo: Black Power

The eighteenth century witnessed the dawn of a new age in racial politics in the region that now comprises El Salvador and Guatemala as a result of the *morenos*' audacious refusal to pay the *laborio* tribute imposed on free people of African origins throughout the colonial period. The surge of uprisings stemming from this conflict are extensively described in primary documents indicating the extent to which *alcalderias* throughout the Salvadoran and Guatemalan provinces were made vulnerable to attacks by the livid *moreno* masses for a period of 30 years (1690-1720) until the tribute was abolished (Lokken 10). Free people of African ancestry had come to represent the largest ethnic group in the capital city and their refusal to pay tribute amounted to a conscious, collective effort to renegotiate the terms of their labor. As Catherine Komisaruk indicates, the emancipation that came with Independence was a simple formality—the real transformations had occurred much earlier.

A pause to consider outliers, which in statistical analysis are data points on a graph or in a set of results that are much bigger or smaller than the nearest data point, is in order. Close consideration of prominent blacks and mulattos requires that we consider them in the context of the *populus*. Whereas their forefathers had been largely enslaved

and defined by Spaniards as *negros* at the end of the sixteenth century, the generation of *morenos* who challenged royal decree at the end of the seventeenth consisted almost exclusively of free people who achieved a certain measure of upward mobility through marriage and military service (Lokken 10). Free blacks created an imaginary that increasingly posited their society not as Africanized, but *ladino*: a term that exists today as the predominant popular and official descriptor for non-indigenous in Guatemala (Komisaruk 171). The challenge to paying tribute was provoked by an affirmation of themselves not an ethno-racial subaltern collective, but as *the* privileged elite of eighteenth century colonial society in the isthmus.

Free *morenos* were in the clear, but what of the few slaves that remained in the Captaincy of Guatemala? Emancipation could not be officially declared because it would have established a precedent that would have affected Spanish holdings in the Caribbean. Aspects of colonial law, particularly responsive to the particularities of Central American society facilitated the slaves' efforts to gain freedom. As Catherine Komisaruk explains:

The Spanish judicial system allowed slaves to file civil and criminal charges against any subjects of the crown, including their masters. The crown provided slaves with attorneys through the office of the Procurator for the Poor, and court records demonstrate that slaves in late colonial Guatemala were indeed availing themselves of their right to litigate. Granted, urban slaves had easier access to the courts. But among rural slaves who trickled into the capital, some came seeking legal recourse, usually against their masters. Their testimonies indicate that even in the countryside slaves knew of their right to appeal to authorities. (154)

Price ceilings on slaves had been established as the original value of a slave and this expanded the possibility of a slave to purchase his/her freedom, a settlement most slaveholders were willing to make. Liberty could be attained as a result of: “movement and flight” to the capital, which became a hub for legal and extra legal emancipations; “slaves seeking employers,” wherein slaves solicited their own purchase to masters of their choice; “negotiating the price of their freedom,” where settlement was sought either legally or through informal means; “crossing over on credit,” where slaves attained their freedom with the promise to pay former masters in installments (Komisaruk 163-168). As a system that allowed slaves to avail themselves of legal institutions, it is undoubtedly a framework that will surprise the scholar of Caribbean slavery and emancipation. In the Captaincy of Guatemala—which included present-day Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica—the system worked for slaves.

The practices of racial passing and the legal means of attaining manumission, coupled with a history of being conscripted into newly created mulatto militia units charged with defending Spanish territory from Spain’s European rivals, only increased the sense of collective power wielded by blacks (Lokken 12). The final result of the smearing of “color-coded” spaces was the invisibility of black subjects *per se*, and the readjusted sightlines that highlighted the presence of lettered *morenos*. The black body was circumscribed in a labor category and this permitted the legal basis for their racial passing and valorization of aptitude. On the other hand, the uninterrupted narrative of the indigenous subject as an ethnic subject lacking the power of speech and representation became a central point of departure in the history of ideas. A final note: civil authorities

registered the names of all the slaves who came to their offices to claim their liberty when general emancipation was declared in the Captaincy of Guatemala in 1824 (Komisaruk 170). In an administrative division of thousands of *morenos*, only the names of fifty adults and eighteen children were recorded. Blackness was a liminal constitutive element in the New Peoples of the new Federal Republic of Central America; at this historical juncture, blackness was signified as the embodiment of inexhaustible opportunity.

Slaves and Masters on a Common Quest for Independence

The *moreno* populations in the San Salvador and Guatemala provinces were crucial constituents that had to be taken into account on October 16, 1810 when Don José María Peinado of Guatemala, acting under the auspices of the liberal party, drafted the *Instrucciones para la Constitución fundamental de la Monarquía española, y su gobierno, de que ha de tratarse en las próximas Cortes generales de la Nación*. The document addressed matters such as popular sovereignty, social equality and civil liberties. Concretely, the document called on the King to serve as a “father and a citizen” and to make the Magistrate “simply an executor of the law” in order to ensure a political system that would safeguard the three “sacred principles of property, liberty and security” (Baron Castro 111). United in a common civilizing mission, Central American *criollos* forged liberal reforms that would ultimately serve to integrate the isthmus within the nascent independent Pan-American economies. The *morenos* of the isthmus had constructed by 1810 a radical imaginary, as evidenced by narratives, statistics and official edicts of the period. This Afro-Central American endeavor overlapped the instituting

society, understood as that which creates and brings into being processes within socio-historical institutions.

In January 1822 José Matías Delgado submitted his petition for abolition before the Salvadoran *junta de gobierno* that he presided over (Martínez Durán and Contreras 225). In August 1823 four *criollos* signed a proposal submitted to the Constituent National Assembly requesting that all slaves, regardless of the status of their mothers, be declared free without having to repay their former owners (Martínez Durán and Contreras 229). The matter advanced rapidly from this point forward—José Simeón Cañas argued that it was urgent that slaves be granted their freedom, advocated for the creation of a restitution fund for their former owners and contended that any foreign or national subject should lose their rights to citizenship if s/he was found guilty of possessing or trafficking slaves (Martínez Durán and Contreras 230). Article 13 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Central America signed into effect on April 24, 1824 made manumission official across the Central American territory.

Now the moment was ripe for the black subject's self-fashioning into subjects whose very possibility of integration into white-coded public and private spaces was dependent on the degree of their economic utility. In what would soon become Central America, the willful oblivion of a cultural component of difference by *criollos* and black subjects ensured absolution from a history of slavery ridden with color-coded inscriptions of consequences and liabilities. Out of the possible chaos caused by an overthrown caste system or an anarchic, unsystematic system of privileges emerges the insistence of sameness—headed by black subjects themselves.

This process was made manifest in discourses emerging in the newly created Federal Republic of Central America and was likewise brought to the fore in narratives *about* this new nation. In a second edition of *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt asks, “How have Europe’s subordinated others shaped Europeans constructions of them and the places they inhabit? Or Europe’s understanding of itself?” (4). Travel narratives gave their European readers a sense of ownership, entitlement and familiarity over the distant lands they described, whilst affirming the metropole as a determinant of the periphery and blinding itself to the power of the reverse dynamic. Nonetheless, travel writing like that of Jacobo Haefkens’ *Viaje a Guatemala y Centroamérica* (1832)³ carry the embedded traces of how intellectuals in the isthmus would put to rest the matter of accounting for the blacks in their *populus*. Haefkens’ primary interest is to sketch a history of Guatemala, paying special attention to the social groups that constitute the population in said territory. There are three social classes, according to Haefkens: the white upper class, which enjoyed such luxuries as comfortable homes, fine clothing, excellent horses and delicious food; the middle class—racially unclassified—which had stable work, clean clothes and enough food; and the indigenous, who were exploited and subjected to forced labor despite their legal condition as free individuals.

As an intellectual with the express intention of relating his account to the King of the Netherlands, Haefkens would have been keenly aware of the writings on race promulgated during the Enlightenment, particularly Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s *On*

³ The discussion of Haefkens’ text has been limited in this chapter for the sake of brevity. Nonetheless, I am currently preparing an article largely devoted to Haefkens’ observations of Central America and Belize with respect to the matter of slavery and the relocation of slaves from Belize to Guatemala following independence.

the Natural Varieties of Humankind (1776). The text posited that there were five races belonging to humankind: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian (Black), American (Indigenous) and Malay. The four latter races were said to have degenerated from the ideal Caucasian stock. In his account, Haefkens declares that the Central American population, “comprende personas de todas las razas imaginables, pero se divide en tres clases principales” (Haefkens 289). The category *mestizo*, which was already a misnomer in Central America by 1832, creates trouble when attempting a streamlined classification of the races. The population was comprised of, “blancos. Mestizos, descendientes de blancos e indios, llamados también ladinos. De blancos y negros, y otras mezclas. En Centroamérica suelen llamarse ladinos e indios, denominados también indígenas” reports Haefkens (289). To this, Haefkens adds a note stating that he does not mention blacks in his racial category because their number is too low to be mentioned. Yet he proposes the following proportions in his examination of the population in Central America: “1/12 de blancos, o sean 125,000. 4/12 de ladinos o mestizos, o sean 500,000. 7/12 de indígenas, o sean 875,000” (Haefkens 289). Though the exact number of the population—1,500,000 according to the author—is not a relevant matter to be proven or disproven, what is important to note is the manner in which the *mestizo* and mulatto categories are subsumed in Haefkens’ observations.

In fact, the collapse of these categories (and the elimination of the many other “castes” that were in vogue in New Spain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) is characteristic of technical writing on populations in this period in Central America. In this manner, the mulattos and blacks in the isthmus begin to “disappear” into the general

population of the newly formed republic. Racial passing, the gradual process of becoming accepted as *morenos* and *mestizos*, rather than *negros*, *zambaigos*, *tente-en-el-aire*, *tornatrás*, *no-te-entiendo* and so forth, made black subjects unrepresentable in written discourses, whether this be intended for a foreign or *criollo* audience, or statistical analyses.

The same could not be said for the indigenous populations frozen in place in the national imaginary. Haefkens lamented the fact that the status of indigenous peoples had fallen to such a degree that even blacks and *esclavos de derecho* treated them with disdain. According to Haefkens, this was a pitiful consequence of the most noble of intentions. While Bartolomé de las Casas had intended to relieve the indigenous peoples from a vile existence by advocating for African slavery, he became the *auteur* of “un vil trato, mientras que el negro, trasladado al Nuevo Mundo se convirtió en su enemigo y no pocas veces en su opresor” (Haefkens 135). This was due to the fact that the *mestizo* and *moreno* populations comprising the middle class were not forced into hard labor in the rural areas; they were instead channeled into the professions and small-scale business endeavors available in the urban centers. They were valuable in post-independence society, according to Haefkens, due to their exceptional skills in trades where they were commissioned by the upper classes to fashion objects that would compete with those made in the Old World (Haefkens 290).

If control of the written word had been the initial step into “passing” into color-coded spaces, their acceptance into the military—one of the most defining of the institutions erected in Central America following Independence—ensured their seamless

passage out of blackness and *mestizaje*, the coveted identification of the period. In his account of the civil wars between liberals and federalists in Nicaragua, Haefkens highlights the mythic quality that Cleto Ordoñez would have on the mulattos of this province:

No es de extrañarse que no pudo producirse tanto cambio sin exacerbar los ánimos y crear partidos. Estos últimos consistieron por un lado, de los blancos y sus partidarios y el citado Obispo desempeñaba un importante papel entre ellos. Por el otro lado estaban los de color y los indios. Tanto se desmandaron, que de una y otra parte comenzaron a armarse. [...] Siendo el partido de los blancos de considerable minoría en León, los mulatos se habían apoderado de la mayor parte de la ciudad, pero en la otra parte sus oponentes continuaban defendiéndose. [...] Recibieron los blancos refuerzos desde *Chinandega* y *El Viejo*. Lanzaron una nueva ofensiva contra los liberales (así se llamaban los mulatos), que a su vez habían recibido ayuda de *Granada* [...] Terminaron por fin con la retirada de los blancos a Managua. Mientras la guerra civil sobresaltaba a esta desafortunada urbe y sus contornos con sus horrores, hizo sentir su fatal impacto también por el rumbo de Granada. Los liberales, capitaneados por un mulato malévolo de nombre de *Cleto Ordoñez* predominaban allí, pero mientras enviaban auxilio a sus hermanos de León, tenían que hacer frente a los de Nicaragua, donde habían abrazado el partido de los blancos (Haefkens 168).

The year was 1824, just three years after independence had been declared and the same year that the last sixty-eight slaves had officially gained their freedom, yet already a

mulatto dared to lead others of his social class and race to challenge the establishment. *Morenos* had come to represent the liberal party while the conservative party was predominantly white, marking a division that was not only social and racial but also ideological. In their transformation from *morenos* to *mestizos*, this group established a liberal ideological map that visually reinforced the stereotypes of a white *criollo* class, staunchly old-guard, that vehemently opposed smearing color-coded spaces. Forming their own party consolidated *moreno*-turned-*mestizo*-hegemonic power and demonstrates to us today the degree of military prowess that mulattos had achieved by this date. Two factors ensure us of their aplomb: that their military power led to the withdrawal of the “partido de los blancos” from León and that Granada, the second of the two colonial urban pearls in Nicaragua, supported their efforts.

Of Writing and Passing into Fictions

With their missives and travel narratives, witnesses of racial passing in the seventeenth and eighteenth century documented the transformation of the black diaspora from represented subjects to agents of representation. The two possible responses to this predicament were the fabrication of utopias, which permit fables and discourse, or the production of heterotopias, which have the power to “desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences” (Foucault xviii). If myths and fables can only result from the fabrication of utopias, as Michel Foucault insists, the fictional rendition of blacks in Central American letters only becomes possible at the end of this trajectory. The utopias created by intellectuals in the isthmus—texts that will be explored in the

chapters that follow—reflect a nostalgia for the color-coded spaces in written and visual discourses initially established in the colonial period. These stories bear the same stamp of trepidation evident in colonial writings about the increasing intimacy between bodies of different colors and stand in stark contrast to the audacious intellectual production of black subjects in the isthmus—just as they have since the initial emergence of black writings.

By the time abolition was declared, slaves had taken pen to paper and argued for themselves that they wished to be recognized as free men, capable of reason and willing to be citizens of the new nation. The geographic and socio-economic factors that distinguished the isthmus from other Spanish, Portuguese or British colonies made it possible for Afro-descendants to challenge precepts that stood as fact in other contexts: “Blacks and other people of color could not write. Writing, many Europeans argued, stood alone among the fine arts as the most salient repository of ‘genius,’ the visible sign of reason itself” (Gates 9). Writing was a vehicle to express reason and those Europeans and their descendants who sought to represent “others” in the Captaincy of Guatemala, later to be called the Federal Republic of Central America, did so with the implicit belief that these were groups who had no claim to history or reason. As Gates observes in his discussion of slaves who obtained their freedom through the production and circulation of texts authored by themselves, “writing, for these slaves, was not an activity of mind; rather it was a commodity which they were forced to trade for their humanity” (Gates 9). The isthmus presented possibilities for Afro-descendants that were unmatched by territories that would become the United States, Mexico, the Caribbean or Brazil.

In September 1823 six slaves from Trujillo, Honduras whose last names were Alvarez, Morejón, Berardez, Hota, Cabal y Navarro presented their petition for freedom written by themselves:

La libertad civil del hombre es joya inestimable sin la cual se haya careciendo del bien que ofrece el pacto social de sus semejantes... El Supremo Hacedor del Género Humano (según demuestra la Sagrada Escritura) no autoriza servidumbre a que están condenados los infelices que han tenido la desgracia de ser esclavos. Dios no quiere se esclavicen los hombres que EL ha echado al mundo libres ... Presentamos a la vista del Congreso Nacional el origen de la que hoy día se le da el vergonzoso epíteto de esclavitud, que no es otro más que la relajada avaricia de los hombres que, por aumentar sus caudales, han infestado las desgraciadas costas de la Africa, esclavizando a sus habitantes, que en sentido claro, no es otra que robarles la preciosa joya de su Libertad, y privarles la vida social de que son sus crueles homicidas, principio que debe ser hoy reputado y calificado por ilegal en todo juicio, porque ¿qué legalidad puede ofrecer cualquiera que haya sido su primer convenio, si la ley natural nos demuestra de que todos los hombres hemos nacido libres? Siendo lo relacionado una verdad innegable, y el principal objeto del Congreso Nacional sancionar leyes sabias en que descansa la libertad individual sostenida por ellas (Martínez Durán y Contreras 227-228).

Also in September 1823, another group of slaves from the Santo Domingo Convent in Palencia, Guatemala presented the following petition: “Somos los más infelices pero conocemos que el oro es una tierra amarilla y que la plata es una tierra blanca. La

Asamblea aprecia a los hombres y no hace caso de la tierra por blanca o por amarilla” (Martínez Durán y Contreras 228). The authors were Pineda, Espinoza, Gonzáles Revolorio, López, Candelaria and Santos; their pen strokes reveal their transgressions into the space of the written word. As evidenced in this chapter, the rise of technical writing by and about blacks can be considered a way of negotiating the aphasia caused by an ever-increasing heteroclitic society and the rise of a mulatto class ever eager to partake in bourgeois cultural hegemony.

In the wake of the disorder of the transition from a caste system to a more modern class society based in the *gente decente vs. plebe* model, Afro-descendants began to claim acceptance within the hegemonic culture, compelling official recognition of their “sameness” with gentry and *mestizos* of honorable status. They chose to forget the collective memory of slavery and opted for the written word of their colonial masters, thus laying a claim to their humanity and individuality—key modern concepts in the nineteenth century. Dissolving notions of origin and standing at the threshold of a new political configuration, the black peoples of Central America seized their rightful place as citizens of the new Republic. Manumission and the elimination of racial categories identifying blackness set the stage for the romantic representation of blacks in Central American letters, for they could only be apprehended and subjected to representation in the “elsewhere” of fiction.

CHAPTER 2
Intellectual Rapture: On Good Taste, Blackness and Poetic Passions

El romanticismo lo hermosteó todo, hasta los negros.

Rubén Darío, *Parisianas* (1917)

The Atlantic Ocean over which goods and black bodies were trafficked can be understood as a grid over which positions of subjectivity and alterity were carefully plotted, resulting in critical transactions. The forced dispossessions of slaves and the transatlantic journeys of their masters have been amply documented, opening the floor to a discussion of the flights over and across the Black Atlantic of the hermeneutics of discursive constructions. This chapter takes Paul Gilroy's cue that this body of water be examined as an "anachronic system of cultural exchange" with linguistic, political and intellectual repercussions (19). The focus of this analysis is the intertextual interplay of texts in a selection of Rubén Darío's oeuvre and Francisco Gavidia's *Júpiter*.⁴ The overlapping narratives, I observe, respond to the political circumstances of nineteenth century Central America and interweave a range of temporally discontinuous influences

⁴ Francisco Gavidia—poet, playwright, philologist, historian, essayist and humanist *par excellence*—is principally credited with having taught Rubén Darío alexandrine verse. Though his poetry places him steadfastly in the *modernista* tradition, his prose celebrates national heroes and features quintessential Salvadoran themes. Gavidia, who believed that history, archaeology and anthropology had failed the Salvadoran people by not shedding light on their origins, exalted the exotic qualities of indigenous cultures and rural landscapes in many of his works.

from across the Atlantic Ocean. These texts subject the implicit reader to an aesthetic education by supplying copious allusions to influential works, demonstrating the Central American intellectuals' literary prowess as manifested by their ability to make blackness a sublime element in their writing.

As François-Xavier Guerra demonstrates in his study of intellectual circles in the early nineteenth century, the proliferation of printing led to an unprecedented volume of writing that was devoured by the elites. The majority of books, newspapers and other printed materials that were read in colonial Spanish America came from Spain, but also from the Low Countries, Italy, Switzerland and France (Guerra 12). These publications included dictionaries, grammars, histories, geographies, novels, theological treatises and the latest in philosophy—all of which enabled the illustrious elites to keep abreast of cultural and scientific developments as well as the debates surrounding the French revolution (Guerra 12). In the first section, I explore the cartographies of privileges that result from the embedded references to blackness in two of Ruben Darío's early poems. My intention is to demonstrate that Darío's nascent style seeks comfort from political disenfranchisement in ornate lyricism. The second section, which focuses on the unequal division of passions and privileges in Francisco Gavidia's play, continues this conversation. Identifying the repressions and unwilled admissions about blackness in the final products—the texts analyzed here—enable me to identify the ardent will to make beauty reign over reason in formalist compositions that never quite escape the tensions of a copious cosmopolitanism amidst the problematic nation-building in the isthmus.

Mapping Privileges in Early Darian Poetry

On the eve of Latin American independence, Simón Bolívar proclaimed in his “Carta de Jamaica” (1815) that the glorious destiny of the Federal Republic of Central America was ensured by its very location and the degree to which this could be used strategically to increase the wealth of the new republics:

Esta magnífica posición entre los dos mares podrá ser con el tiempo el emporio del universo; sus canales acortarán las distancias del mundo; estrecharán los lazos comerciales de Europa, América y Asia; traerán a tan feliz región los tributos de las cuatro partes del globo. ¡Acaso sólo allí podrá fijarse algún día la capital de la tierra como pretendió Constantino que fuese Bizancio la del antiguo hemisferio!

(28)

The Federal Republic of Central America would serve as a broker for trade with Europe and Asia and soon, the promised wealth of Nuestra América would make its way through the isthmus before being redistributed to the north and south. This was the promising future imagined for Central America and by 1875, its ruling elites incorporated into their societies the symbols that they considered relevant to their assumed cosmopolitanism: Napoleonic codes, new editions of Sir Walter Scott’s novels, flushing toilets, French interior home decorating, and Victorian roofs, were purchased with capital garnered through the exportation of coffee (Ramírez 288). Aesthetic conceptions were intimately tied to the cultural patterns permitted by the economic boom resulting from Central America’s position in the world markets.

Rubén Darío “liberó a España de la mazmorra neoclásica, así como sacó a América de un caliginoso romanticismo de segunda mano” by producing poetry that was “cósmica, brutalmente llena de vida y angustia” (Ruiz 17, 19). *Epístolas y poemas* (1885) represents the poet’s first attempt at transgressing national borders and regionalist concerns and venture into the terrain of artifice. This publication is the first indication of Darío’s mastery of poetics, of imparting the sensation of the referent, as it is perceived instead of how it is manifested physically. As the Russian formalist, Viktor Shklovskij, explains: “the technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty of length and perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in and of itself and must be prolonged” (XX). This collection of poems precedes the publication of his classic *Azul...* (1888) and marks Darío’s transition from the political poems commissioned by the Liberal party in Nicaragua to his venture into the modernist compositions he is known for today. *Epístolas y poemas* is a bridge to his most renowned oeuvre and as such, it explicitly manifests the poet’s debt to the Spanish classics, Victor Hugo’s romantic models and the neoclassic influences in the epistles directed to key literary figures. It allows the poet to fashion an artistic identity independent of a strictly Central American geopolitical position and assume the position of a poet-inheritor of transcontinental aesthetic concerns.

The poems composed before *Epístolas y poemas* allowed Darío to make his mark on intellectual circles and, as his commissions from dictators and politicians increased, so did his diplomatic privileges and access to travel. Yet it would be extreme oversight to label Rubén Darío a political ideologue of any persuasion since, as David E. Whisnant

observes in his analysis of Somocista and Sandinista cooptation of the poet's image, "Darío's life and work have offered a tantalizing array of data for opposing exegetical agendas, sufficiently diverse and contradictory to admit a variety of interpretations" (42). His earlier poems are exemplary of three qualities not found in Darío's canonical *modernista* poetry: provincialism, regionalism and patriotism. This last quality is recuperated in Darío's anti-Yankee poetry, which appears following the 1889 Spanish-American war in Cuba and the United States' 1904 acquisition of the Panama Canal. Such political rhetoric comes to an end when Darío releases the fleeting goal of bringing together the Federal Central American Republic once again.⁵ His classic poetry, then, serves a distinctly different purpose than the "bridge" poems in *Epístolas y poemas*.

Blackness and Orientalism are thrown into sharp relief in two of these poems, "El porvenir" and "Alí," which allow his reader to experience the artfulness of his carefully sculpted verse and his range of literary influences. This content does not reflect a will to escape Latin American reality, argues Araceli Tinajero. Rather, it responds to the poets' realities through new rhythms, love for elegance and the rejection of the prosaic because, "explorar el Oriente era ya una forma de encontrar respuestas trascendentales que no podían encontrar en su propio contexto por la falta de sensibilidad que sentían a su alrededor" (Tinajero 16). Darío grappled with transcendental questions that involved an inquiry into the possibility of using poetics as a vehicle to achieve an ideal spiritual state, surpassing the physical and the empirical. Formalist strategies, such as *ostranenie*, subtract substance from the referent and "remove the automatism of perception; the

⁵ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve further into Rubén Darío's early commissioned poetry. I will return to this in a forthcoming publication.

author's purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized perception" (Shklovsky 19). As the intended reader experiences defamiliarization with Blackness and the Orient, "El porvenir" and "Alí" situate him in a space of privilege at the crossroads of four continents.

This is exemplified in "El porvenir" where the poetic voice meanders across continents to arrive at what the future holds for his homeland. Asia had been imprinted in the Latin American intellectual imaginary since the sixteenth century when ships laden with goods had departed Acapulco destined for Manila, Philippines (Tinajero 22). Nonetheless, the poetic voice does not reference trade routes, but rather a repertoire of mystical symbols associated with literary apprehension of the continent. Asia *is* the Ganges, Brahmans, armed nomads, forests, elephants, hippopotamuses and rhinoceroses. As Tzvetan Todorov demonstrates in *The Conquest of America*, the discovery the *self* makes of the *other* is rife with paradoxes and hermeneutic twists. Columbus spoke of the men he saw only because to him, they constituted a part of the landscape that so profoundly enchanted him (Todorov 34). Cortés' actions demonstrate that a superior understanding of the vanquished made destruction possible, defying the inclination to assume that comprehension goes hand in hand with sympathy (Todorov 128). Loaded with historicity as they may be, these examples highlight a paradox in Rubén Darío's poems as well as the play written by Francisco Gavidia that we will examine. Traveling through spaces and privileges in references to Asia, Europe and Africa, allowed these nineteenth century writers to stress worldliness and refinement without undergoing the

inconveniences of crude voyages or opening the pages of vulgar travel narratives for inspiration.

The Latin America-Europe connection in the poem seemingly replicates the ideological relationship manifested by imperialist center-periphery relationships. The poetic voice praises Europe for being the site from whence Voltaire laughed, Cervantes spoke and Dante was born. It appeases the learned reader who expects to read that this continent's arm is London, its soul is Paris and masterful frescoes decorate the walls of Rome and Madrid. The muses have blessed Europe, but the gods have elevated the Americas by granting it unparalleled riches and beauty. In a swift and unexpected twist, the poem heralds the trumpet of fame that will carry its song from the Chimborazo volcano in Ecuador to the Argentinean pampas and over the Tequendama Falls in Colombia. The grandeur of América isn't located in a particular Central American site of contestation, but rather in a poetic conception of the continent's nature.

Darío maps continents according to myths, legends and legendary figures, a strategy that he likewise employs in his depiction of Africa. While the matter at hand is not whether or not he believes in his contemporaries' reading of the Curse of Ham, what is interesting is his poetic use of this scheme. In "El porvenir," the presumed biblical reference generates *ostranenie* while establishing the supremacy of América over Africa:

El África tostada,
ya de antiguo sombría, aletargada,
donde el fiero león sangriento ruge,
bate el ala el *simoun* y vuela y muge

la tierra en donde moran
los hombres de piel negra,
hijos de Cam,⁶ que su desgracia ignoran
y a quienes claro día nunca alegra;
porque es raza de esclavos y precita,
raza sin libertad, raza maldita. (“El porvenir” 317)

In this scheme, Africa remains unchanged in its misery while América, as previously established, marches forward in its path towards progress. The inclusion of a “periphery of the periphery” relationship is of interest here precisely because the Latin American writer was conscious and fully cognizant of how he and other “inferior” cultures were constructed through European discourses. The passage replicates a series of *signs* crafted by Europeans about Africa and by integrating them into the poem, the poet elevates himself to a place of privilege from whence he is at once creator and designator of those signs. The Latin American intended reader who overcomes the defamiliarization caused by this poetic language by comprehending the reference to blackness is subtly invited to assume this position, as the process serves to realign him with a process of cognitive mapping crucial for disassociating himself with a colonial past. As Carlos Real de Azúa notes regarding such poetry, “lo que más generalmente se advierte es una concepción de la identidad latinoamericana como una especie de molde a llenar o, en otra imagen, de taracea a componer con los diversos ingredientes europeos contemporáneos” (48).

⁶ See Chapter 1, page 62. Writing in 1615 Fray Juan de Torquemada looked to the story of Noah’s son, Ham, to account for blackness and to justify the perceived inferiority of blacks in the caste system.

“El porvenir” invites the intended reader to make sense of his own Latin American identity by taking him to the Sahara, a desert that is quickly disassociated from the northern and southern extremities of the continent by the use of poetic references. Memphis, the Egyptian city described earlier in the poem, has vanished and left in its place a barren, lethargic, scorched void wherein ferocious lions are said to roar and terrorize inhabitants and travelers alike. Colonial accounts of the simooms, a dust-laden wind that blows in the Sahara and parts of the Middle East, serve the poet well as he constructs an account of the oppressiveness of the climate. Through the damning pronouncement that associates blackness with the Curse of Ham, the poetic voice severs the location-nationality connection that remains in place for América and Europe and settles for an interpretation of blackness based on phenotype in his pronouncement of Africa’s bleak destiny. In the same breath, it provides a religious justification for its manifestation. Positions are mapped through a metonymical transfusion from nature to people: blacks are condemned to be slaves, to be ignorant of the curse that has befallen them—here, the implication being that they have not been Christianized and thus do not have the power of understanding the origins of the curse as dictated in Genesis. As neither Christians nor free men, they face the consequences of their destitution. This technique served a purpose anchored in the socio-political history of Central American society of the time: to dignify the whiteness of the elite and, perhaps more subtly, to align Latin American intellectual history with the ideology of biological determinism in vogue in Anglo-Saxon and European contexts (Real de Azúa 48). In Darío’s early poetry, then, such an allegiance hinged on blackness and orientalist depictions.

Aside from establishing the polarities between rational and irrational subjects, the main feat of Orientalism was to stress that, “the Oriental lived in a different but thoroughly organized world of his own, a world with its own national, cultural and epistemological boundaries and principles of internal coherence” (Said 40). A parallel maneuver is deployed in Darío’s poem “Alí,” which is also included in *Epístolas y poemas*. In line with Western Orientalism, the poem stresses that the black subject’s world has its very own intelligibility and identity, though the intended reader can discern that the very logic of this microcosm will lead to its own demise. The written and historical commentary of Victor Hugo regarding the Orient is present in Darío’s deployment of noteworthy tropes. As Richard B. Grant observes in relation to Hugo’s *Les orientales*, the dazzling colors of the East are present but, “all the oriental color and picturesque detail are somewhat illusory, because more often than not Hugo set his bright and cheerful colors against a background of darkness, destruction and death” (Grant 895). So too with “Alí,” which foreshadows an apocalyptic description of the title character and the object of his desire, Zela. It is necessary to emphasize that this composition precedes Darío’s *modernista* compositions and clearly a romantic poem, due to its form, its intention, verse, varied influences and array of sources.

Darío explicitly states at the beginning of the poem that it is dedicated to a friend who enjoys the pleasures of the “mysterious Orient,” understood as “luxurious and imaginative.” His intended reader is one who delights in Zorrilla’s legends written in a style described as “half pearls, half honey and flowers” and it is at his request that Darío has set out to produce something that, he admits, lacks Théophile Gautier’s hashish.

Written as a legend in verse in a style that draws its inspiration from Zorrilla, the poem achieves a seamless transfer of the ideological content of North Africa as represented in the French tradition and Spanish traditions that is evident in the very introduction to the two star-crossed lovers it features.

Zela is the prototypical female found in Darío's later *modernista* poems—beautiful, graceful and celestial—but in this early poem, the damsel is a Moor and her lover is an Ethiopian. She is an Oriental nymph whose abundant curls fall over her shoulders and whose hands are like a bouquet of lilies; Zephyrus, god of the west wind, irons her silk vestments. As the central female character develops in the poem, so too does Darío's contribution to the discussion among French colonial intellectuals about the representation of Muslim women at the turn of the century. As Julia Clancy-Smith indicates, there were two schools of thought: the first held that a Muslim woman was “nothing but an *objet de luxe*, a sensual, indolent, bored creature, caged like a bird in the harem” while the second held that she was “a servant or slave condemned by her husband to forced labor, and implicitly, forced sex” (Clancy-Smith 214). In “Alí,” the young girl goes from being her father's captive to her lover's luxurious object to another man's harem girl.

Alí is a slave to none other but Zela's love. As beautiful as he is strong-willed, his soul blends the traits of a panther and a dove. The verses that present him to the reader demonstrate that he is not the broken black slave under the whip; rather, he is the black warrior feared by the Bedouin who dare not humiliate him or threaten him with their weapons:

Alí es el etíope bello;
negro, hermoso, alto y fornido;
de ojo brillante, encendido,
y de encrespado cabello;
sobre la faz lleva el sello
de un vigor que no se doma:
según el rumbo que toma,
él es en su alma altanera
feroz como una pantera,
tierno como una paloma.
(“Alí” 333)

Like Herodotus, who was the first European to express an opinion about the physical appearance of Ethiopians, Darío does not hesitate to highlight the black subject’s beauty. In the texts of antiquity, color does not preclude the requisites for beauty. From Philodemus, Asclepiades, Theocritus, Suetonius, Vergil, Ovid, Luxorius and others, there is a plethora of implied and explicit references to the beauty of blackness (Snowden 77). Greek and Roman texts stipulate individual preferences and relative standards of beauty, emphasizing as Propertius did in one text that “tender beauty, white or dark, attracts” (Snowden 79). Like Zela the Moor, Alí the Ethiopian is an aesthetic figure that destabilizes the expectations of the intended reader who, unaware of the depth of the classical influence on Darío’s work, would expect a black in a late nineteenth century

poetic text to be tinged by markers of ugliness implied by positivist currents in vogue in the period.

Alí is docile in Zela's presence, complying with her wish and sobbing on his hands and knees when he disappoints her. Zela, who cries when Alí is away and sighs when her gaze meets his, also demonstrates this absolute devotion. Fearing the wrath of Zela's cruel father, the two lovers meet secretly under the full moon. Alí promises his beloved wealth and happiness, imploring her to part with him:

“Ven conmigo bella flor;
vente conmigo a gozar;
mil prendas te voy a dar
como te he dado mi amor”.

Y cargando con vigor
la niña, salió en secreto
del jardín, y a un vericuerdo
se dirigió, do tenía
el corcel, que ya quería
correr afanoso, inquieto.

Petro de negro color,
nariz ancha, fino cabo,
crespa crin, tendido rabo,
cuello fino, ojo avizor,

enjaezado con primor,
de Alí corcel de combate,
nunca el cansancio lo abate
y casi no imprime el callo,
cuando se siente el caballo
herido del acicate.

En ese va el africano
por el desierto con Zela:
va el corcel como que vuela
para un país muy lejano;
y siguen al negro ufano,
con paso tardo, distantes,
los camellos y elefantes
do puso riquezas mil
de perlas, oro y marfil,
y rubíes y diamantes.

(“Alí” 336)

Hitherto this passage, Darío replicated classical conceptions of blackness as an aesthetic quality and Théophile Gautier’s passion to situate luxury and beauty against an exotic backdrop. In his preface to *Émaux et Camées*, Gautier had established a similar pattern of inspiration upon acknowledging the extent to which his own collection of poems had

been inspired by Goethe's *Divan occidental* and his work by that Hafez, the Persian poet. The genealogy traces the Western subject's desire to bridge Christian-Muslim traditions through the artifice of poetry, parables and epic lyricism. Firmly in place is a schema for reading, not only the culture but also the imagined gendered dynamics in such a context. Creating "art for art's sake," as Gautier and the Parnassians who were influenced by him declared, was nonetheless a reaction to the political and literary circumstances these literary masters faced.

Théophile Gautier writes of his predecessor: "When empires lay riven apart,/Fared Goethe at battle time's thunder/To fragrant oases of art,/To weave his *Divan* into wonder." He compares Goethe's struggle to produce art against a tumultuous context to the challenges he also faces: "I, closed from the tempest that shook/My window with fury impassioned/Sat dreaming, and, safe in my nook/*Enamels and Cameos* fashioned." Published in 1852 while Gautier was traveling through the Middle East, this collection focuses more on the formalist aspects of poetry than on the emotive objectives of the romantic currents he opted to challenge. A world away, Rubén Darío also responded to a pivotal historical moment by favoring passionate formalism over divisive political rhetoric. As Ángel Rama notes, "en el segundo momento de la *Cultura modernizada internacionalista*, la cualidad de 'literato' habrá de primar sobre la de 'intelectual'. Habrá más poetas líricos y prosistas de cuentos, estampas, esbozos, que expositores de ideas" ("Las máscaras democráticas del modernismo" 44). While the destiny of Central America was thrown into question, Darío surpassed the political rhetoric of his earlier poetry and inherited the passion for artifice and Orientalism germinating across the Atlantic.

However, the passage above marks a turn in the poem from exotic considerations of two star-crossed lovers: Alí, whose beauty and determination extends to his swift steed and Zela, who accepts a romantic flight across the desert accompanied by a caravan of camels and elephants that follow them carrying pearls, gold, ivory, rubies and diamonds. “En ese va *el africano* / por el desierto con Zela,” the poetic voice declares at the beginning of the stanza (“Alí” 336, emphasis mine). While this term works with the rhyme scheme selected, this designation strips Alí of any identification with the Ethiopia of myths and legends. The match between a Muslim woman and an Ethiopian would be plausible, as the many archaeological and literary references cited by Frank M. Snowden posit, precisely due to the Ethiopian’s conversion to Christianity and the bridge to conversion s/he represented for the North American Muslim. Yet “Alí” locates the black male subject squarely as an African and in the very naming, which serves the lyricism of the poem well, the poem subjects their connection to a nineteenth century understanding of an “interracial union.” As the following examples will illustrate, this new position subtracts power from the black male subject in a subtle gesture that highlights his malleability and emasculation. The Sub-Saharan African male is cleverly juxtaposed to the North African Muslim male.

The happy couple and their caravan is juxtaposed with the convoy that Zela’s father leads across the desert to claim his daughter. The old man finally reaches them but, having exhausted himself and his stallion to death, expires shortly after laying a curse over Zela and Alí. The damsel’s realization, “que la maldición de un padre / desata la ira de Dios,” clearly foreshadows their doom though Alí attempts to counter this statement

appealing to Allah's fairness and wisdom ("Alí" 341). No longer designated as an Ethiopian and therefore Christian, Alí appeals to Allah. The curse over the black subject that is developed in this poem, however, is based on Judeo-Christian text: the Curse of Ham. A child has defied/defiled a paternal figure and has committed adultery, following the definition of sexual indiscretion outside of marriage. Indeed, the intent to consummate passion across racial lines serves to justify the demise of Alí. His caresses brush her head and her skin:

y al contacto soberano
de dos almas de amor llenas...
sintió inflamarse en las venas
su sangre el bello africano.

Zela, ahogando su dolor,
sintió palpar su pecho;
y junto a aquel muelle lecho
llegar sentía el amor;
estremecida de ardor
iba en trasportes divinos
a sonar... cuando, ¡oh destinos!,
los siervos gritos lanzaron

que en el aire resonaron

espantosos: “¡Los beduinos!

Alí who has always been able to defeat and terrify the Bedouin is now suddenly powerless and is quickly taken captive, committed to slavery and castrated while Zela becomes the sultan’s concubine. Although the poem has strong romantic overtones, the observation that, “*modernismo*’s aesthetic sublime would be completed, and in more than one sense finished, in a closed circle, where erotic deviance [...] had places assigned beyond the edge of that circle” is fitting to this poem’s development (Montero 114). Not only is castration posited as the ultimate punishment for the black subject who had allowed his sexual appetite to overpower his reason, the eloquent poetic space has no room for eunuchs who blemish its lyricism and artifice.

In “Alí,” as well as in the texts canonically representative of *modernismo*, the critic can find traces of seemingly opposing discourses. The lettered city had been renounced, writes Ángel Rama, and in that context “surge la oposición generalizada en que resultan agrupadas fuerzas entre sí adversas: los retrasados románticos, los conservadores, los liberales, las viejas fuerzas del orden, pero también los racionalistas, el grueso de los ilustrados...” (*Las máscaras democráticas del modernismo* 45). Imitation of form was certainly a vehicle to achieve an aesthetic *mélange* of influences and like alchemists, Darío and other poets sought to make gold from the elements with which they experimented. That which was beautiful, that which was strange, exquisite and luxurious was at the root of the search for a refined experience. A rejection of the vulgar and revolting was implicit. Therefore, blackness, once it was divested of the silk garments afforded by orientalism and classical influences, was subject to the power of positivism

that had taken root in the Central American isthmus and Latin American intellectual circles.

“Alí” bears the mark of French and Spanish romantic incursions into the Orient in the first stanzas and the mark of Anglo-Saxon Positivism and Protestantism by its end. The poetic voice erupts in the narrative to remind the reader of the old man’s curse before describing the opulence of the sultan who is now master of both Zela and Alí. The tale poem reaches its climax when Alí rushes into the bedroom and confronts the sultan just as he is about to copulate with her. Alí has changed dramatically from the beautiful man he once was, to resemble now any other black slave: “Flaco, la frente arrugada / la mano huesosa y dura / la crespa melena oscura / crecida y alborotada / con la vista extraviada” (“Alí” 344). He threatens the sultan with the weapon, declaring that it is he—the ruined subject, he who has lost everything, the wretched creature, mud and rotten seed—who seeks vengeance.

Zela era mi amor; yo el de ella.
ahora, ella altiva; yo vil,
imagínate un reptil
que habla de amor a una estrella...
Hay un monstruo y una bella...,
y ese monstruo tiene ardor...
y es un eunuco, ¡oh dolor!...
Mi amada en regazo ajeno;
yo me revuelco en el cieno,

y tú... ¡tú eres el señor!

Y mientras tú, satisfecho,
besas a mi ángel, yo estoy,
al meditar lo que soy,
en rabia dolor deshecho;
sangran mis uñas mi pecho,
tiemblan mis carnes; y siento
que se me infunde un aliento
de mal, de horrible venganza:
ya que mi brazo te alcanza,
voy a vengar mi tormento.

(“Alí” 345)

Alí can't bear to look at his beloved, who now only inspires hate and repulsion in him, and he consequently murders her and the sultan with a passion only equaled by the devotion he once had for her. He kisses her one last time, “él de ansias y ardores lleno” and stabs himself in the chest before falling by her side and completing the image: “la boda terrible / de un eunuco y una muerta” (“Alí” 346). Thus, Alí has become a wretched creature upon becoming another man's slave and losing his freedom as well as in the moment that he is castrated, letting his emotions take over the power of reason. In doing so, Darío completes a poem that brings together privileges, passions and positions of

three continents. His pen strokes amply allude to the intersections of transcontinental and anachronistic influences in the representations of blackness in his early writing.

Passionate Rhapsody in Black

Rubén Darío captured the explicit message in Giovanni (Cinthio) Battista Giraldi's short story, "Un Capitano Moro" that the Salvadoran Francisco Gavidia will echo four years later. Upon being accused by her husband of infidelity, Desdemona states⁷, "You Moors are of so warm a composition that every trifle transports you with anger and revenge," to which her husband retorts that he will seek vengeance to his satisfaction for any injustices committed against him (Cinthio 292). As his jealousy reaches perilous heights, Desdemona reinforces with growing panic her previous statement: "I begin to fear that my example will teach young women never to marry against their parents' consent, and the Italians in particular, not to connect themselves with men from whom they are separated by nature, climate, education, and complexion" (Cinthio 300). The message is clear: the white woman who marries an "other" is subject to his capricious passions, which are correlated to his nature and origins. This tragic story, written in the sixteenth century and inspiration for Shakespeare's *Othello*, also served as the blueprint for Francisco Gavidia's *Júpiter*.

⁷ As critics have noted, the most significant departure from the original and later adaptations is the severity of Desdemona's murder. In Cinthio's version, the Moor's ensign counsels him to beat his wife to death with a stocking full of sand and later crush her head with a pillar in their bedroom—an act which he carried out without hesitation in order to preserve his reputation and prevent being labeled a cuckold. The translation of this text was prepared by the renowned critic William Hazlitt and the two quotes cited in this chapter read as follows in the original Italian: "Ma voi Mori siete de natura tanto caldi, ch'ogni poco di cosa vi muove ad ira, e a vendetta" / "temo molto di non essere io quella, che dia essemio alle giovani di non maritarsi il voler de'suoi; che la me la donne Italiane imparino di non si accompagnare con uomo, cui la natura, e il Cielo e il motto della vita disgiunge da noi."

Jupiter (1889), a Salvadoran national drama/tragedy⁸, is one of the earliest Central American texts that feature a black slave as the main character and the only play that delves into the complex question of the black subject's political and cultural rights in the context of Independence. *Jupiter* details the events leading to the 1811 uprising commonly heralded as "the first cry for independence" in which a heavily armed contingent of *morenos* played a key role. The play features three Central American founding fathers: Santiago Celis, José Matías Delgado and Manuel José Arce. These three *criollos* come to determine the fate of Júpiter, a literate and God-fearing black man who is granted manumission upon agreeing to enlist San Salvador's slaves and mulattos in his former master's plot against the Crown. In a stunning politicized display of synecdoche, within the framework of the national romance, Júpiter comes to stand for the black masses in the new Central American republics.

Júpiter's position vis-à-vis *criollos* and his destiny in this text is determined by the liberal Central American position that post-independence society could not legally or ethically accept racial segregation—at least in the first half of the nineteenth century—even though "la ideología del momento consideraba compatibles libertad y servidumbre, por la desigualdad que derivaba de las condiciones socioeconómicas, y todo parecía conforme para la voluntad independista" (García Guiraldez 14). Júpiter's character is

⁸ *Jupiter* was first published in the *Repertorio salvadoreño*, the monthly magazine of the San Salvador School of Sciences and Literature, in Volume 3, Issue 4 (October 1889). It was published a second time in 1895 for the San Salvador National Press in a volume under the direction of the editors of the *El Figaro* newspaper. The Salvadoran Dirección de Publicaciones e Impresos oversaw its third publication as part of its "Colección Teatro" in 2002. The play has been staged three times—in 1951, 1971 and 1991 as part of Salvadoran Independence Day celebrations—and adapted as a radio drama in 2006, yet it has never featured a black performer (Molina Tamacas 2006). I study the play here as dramatic literature due to the initial mode of production, circulation and consumption of the text and have an interest in exploring its performances in a future publication.

fashioned accordingly: he is not an upwardly mobile mulatto but a learned slave whose black skin and enslaved condition locates him at the lowest rung of the social structure. Júpiter's tragedy is evident from the opening lines of the play when a servant looking out the window contemplates throwing water over his head—a thought she relishes with laughter. The playwright toys with the reader's response, as the cause of Engracia's laughter is hidden from view and it is not until her lady, Blanca, inquires as to the cause of her laughter that the motive for laughter is revealed. "Un negro, que está allí," replies Engracia, who in stating thus evidences the impossibility of a romantic attachment between a white woman and the black man who worships her.

The drama benefits from a series of sources, not the least of which is Cinthio's short story and Shakespeare's adaptation for the stage. Closer to home, the play is crafted with attention to the construction of a national imaginary that dominated literary production throughout Latin America after independence. In fact, the institutionalization of literature and the proliferation of fiction through newspaper serials and magazines across Latin America in the nineteenth century gave rise to the publication of *folletines*, serial novels and romances that featured "star-crossed lovers who represent particular regions, races, parties and economic interests" whose passion for conjugal and sexual union, argues Doris Sommer, "spills over to a sentimental readership in a move that hopes to win partisan minds along with hearts" (5). Since intellectuals in the nineteenth century were fueled by a desire to establish a literary history that would legitimize their new nations, their foundational fictions equated the ideal of domestic happiness with

dreams of national prosperity, consolidation and growth (Sommer 7). These foundational fictions included a plethora of national romances, national poems, and national dramas.

As Doris Sommer suggests, the national romances provided “gender models that were teaching future republicans to be passionate in a rational and seductively horizontal way” (40). Like nationality, gender would shape the modern individual and examples of the proper manifestations of femininity and masculinity abound in literature that sets forth these models. In *Júpiter*, the reader encounters the angel of Santiago Celis’ home. The young woman is illiterate, has grown up without a mother, fears matrimony because it would imply leaving her father alone and is completely oblivious to her father’s involvement in the independence movement. The opening scene introduces her sewing, silently wiping away the tears as she ponders the reason for her father’s late arrival. As this image, as well as the nineteenth century poetry written by Central American women indicates, the Cult of Domesticity prevalent in Anglo-Saxon literature had taken root in the isthmus. These women were judged by themselves and the men in their lives according to four principal “virtues:” piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Women who complied were guaranteed happiness while those that dared challenge the status quo were “damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization, of the Republic,” for it was woman’s duty to uphold the moral pillars of her society (Welter 52). This ideal interpellated privileged women whose husbands left their homes to make their fortunes in the public sphere and who considered it their duty to provide them comfort from a competitive world by supplying them with a tranquil household and the grace of their feminine companionship.

Blanca is such a gentle creature that upon hearing Engracia's scornful laughter in the opening scene, she quickly defends the slave by conceding to public opinion, "dicen que es muy listo. El padre Delgado le ha enseñado a leer, a escribir y contar" (Gavidia 17). Being under the tutelage of such a prominent liberal who believed, like his counterparts in other regions in Latin America, that root of the ills suffered by the new nations lay in the institutions established during colonial rule, Júpiter had not been denied the right to reading, writing and instruction. Júpiter had absorbed the teachings of his master which echo the romantic ideology examined by Leopoldo Zea, to wit: "la Colonia había formado la mente que ahora entorpecía el progreso. Allí estaba todo el mal. Para desarraigarlo sería menester rehacer desde sus raíces dicha mente. Urgía realizar una nueva tarea: la emancipación mental de Hispanoamérica" (33). Discarding the Spanish Crown implied that "la autonomía del intelecto fue la nueva bandera" (Zea 33). The wealth of timeless classic European texts, Spanish and otherwise, were revised by brilliant individuals who propagated the cherished values of independence.

Júpiter, tragic hero of this national drama, is exceptional indeed. As José Matías Delgado explains to Santiago Celis when the two conspire to involve Júpiter in the independence movement, the slave has served as his master's secretary and has read the works of Elio Antonio de Nebrija, Pedro de Calderón de la Barca and María de Zayas y Sotomayor. The wealth of literary influences alluded to merit pause and attention. Elio Antonio de Nebrija's most celebrated work, *Gramática de la lengua castellana*, was dedicated and presented to Isabella I of Castille with the assertion that, "language was the instrument of the empire." Such was the case both in Spain and in her colonies, where

even subjects who aspired to unleash themselves from imperial rule, found that the humanist tradition continued to be relevant in the intellectual circles of the new nations. “El guineo, blanco los dientes, se enfría los pies” wrote Nebrija as an example of synecdoche in his celebrated 1492 text. The author defines the figure of speech and advances this explanation stating that it relates to a mutual understanding because both speaker and interlocutor understand something in the phrase. As nebulous as “Africa” might have been in the imagination of Nebrija’s readers, two things were understood in the example given: the “peculiar” contrast between black skin and white teeth of the Guineans and the desert heat that brought them to the oasis to cool their feet.

The references in the play are meant to serve as a clear indication that Júpiter is not an incomprehensible, ignorant “bozal” but rather an eloquent individual. However, the assertion that language is the most powerful vehicle for the dissemination of the cultural values of the empire highlights the implicit attitudes regarding blacks in the example of “synecdoche” chosen by Nebrija. As for Calderón de la Barca, his extensive oeuvre includes instances of allegorical figures regarding blackness—the most notable being “Africa”—, which serve as juxtaposition to the Catholic values of the empire. In fact, three of Calderón de la Barca’s plays stand out from the rest in that they are pertinent to the study of the institution of slavery in the seventeenth century. These are *La sibila de Oriente y la gran reina de Sabá*, *Los hijos de la fortuna* and *Teágenes y Caricela*. Lastly, the most influential works of María de Zayas y Sotomayor include *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares*, which not only highlight women’s subjugation to men and, in particular, violence against women in seventeenth century Spain. She was a

staunch advocate for women's independence and their access to education. The fact that these readings are among Júpiter's literary repertoire explains why he later will attempt to lay claim to his rights as an individual. The issue is quite fitting for a national drama, which tends to openly evidence the readings that have shaped the sensibilities of the main characters.

Though Júpiter is well versed in the classics, Delgado is quick to point out that his religious devotion makes him unwilling to accept liberal principles, which are at the behest of rational men. A devotion to the Catholic religion is expected from new citizens, but so is their renouncement of loyalty the Spanish Crown. Júpiter is yet unaware of the dividing lines between liberals and conservatives. The two *criollos* are opposed to José Francisco Barrundia, who has spoken against the incorporation of Central America into Mexico and has manifested an interest in forming an independent federal state modeled on the United States—for this, Barrundia was labeled a dissident and traitor to the United Provinces of Central America, even after having served as the union's vice president. As Delgado asserts, the best way to cajole Júpiter is to appeal to his belief in upward mobility that has been fomented by his reading of the classics:

Delgado: [...] Las historias de príncipes y duquesas le embeben casi tanto, Dios me perdone, como las vidas de los santos. Porque eso sí, es un buen cristiano mi pobre negro: tiene tal vez sus puntos de visionario y fanático; para él no hay sino un malhechor en Centro-América... nuestro amigo Barrundia. Pero gracias a eso no cifra toda su devoción en el Rey Fernando. La aristocracia es su sueño.

Contrastes de la vida: ya ves que no es más que un esclavo.

Celis: Con todo, ese esclavo es un hombre.

Delgado: ... “El tostado africano

Es un hombre, es tu imagen, es mi hermano”.

¡Admirable poeta es Meléndez!

Delgado: Oye, padre. Precisamente hoy que me dices eso de tu esclavo, siento más vivo deseo de hablar con él.

(Gavidia 27)

These statements reduce Júpiter’s aspirations of privilege to the vanity of a man who has not yet realized that he is still a slave despite his erudite tendencies. By quoting Juan Meléndez Valdés’ poem⁹, “La presencia de Dios,” Delgado points to the balance between humanistic values, religious principles and political objectives that constitute the ideological basis of the poem. If men have been made in the image of God, as the often quoted verse in Genesis 1:26 reads, then this is the grand equalizer between ethnic groups as diverse as the Tartars, Sami and Indians and Africans mentioned in the verse. The premise that one man is his brother’s keeper remains present in this pronouncement, a proclamation rooted in the perception of brotherhood as a horizontal alliance. Yet despite its insistence that men of all colors are men, made in God’s image and the poet’s brothers, this position does not eliminate the notion of a standing hierarchy in ethical and experiential matters that determine that a worldlier subject is ethically obliged to guide his less apt brethren.

⁹ The excerpt quoted in the conversation is from the last verse of the poem. The last two verses read: “Hinche el corazón mío/ de un ardor celestial que a cuanto existe / como tú se derrame,/ y, oh Dios de amor, en tu universo te ame./ Todos tus hijos somos:/ el tártaro, el lapón, el indio rudo,/ el tostado africano,/ es un hombre, es tu imagen y es mi hermano” (Meléndez Valdés, “La presencia de Dios” 304).

Firmly locked in the political claims of the leaders of the independence movement, the national drama model allows Gavidia to examine the divergent interests of the *criollo* forefathers and the black masses united for a moment in Central American history on a common quest for independence. The values expressed in the play echo those of José Cecilio del Valle, appointed editor of *El amigo de la patria* in 1821, whose articles enjoyed a readership encompassing representatives and deputies at the provincial and municipal levels. According to this intellectual, the “patria—grande o chica” gave the individual a sense of belonging beyond his or her circumscription to a territory and imbued him with a particular desire, “un deseo de engrandecimiento de la misma, a un sentimiento a la vez de posesión, de donde derivaba el vínculo de lealtad [...] el patriotismo” (García Giráldez 22). In *Júpiter*, the liberal party is seeking to overthrow King Ferdinand VII of Spain and form the Federal Republic of Central America. The challenge is compelling all the main regions of El Salvador (San Miguel, San Vicente, Sonsonate and Santa Ana) to take part in the insurrection, making it necessary to reach out to the masses. These include the numerous black slaves who, according to *criollo* intellectuals, should be ready to join the fight in order to eradicate slavery, an economic, social and political stigma of the colonial period.

The parallel task of intellectuals—in fact and fiction—was to instruct the masses in patriotism. In del Valle’s own words: “amar a la nación o pueblo, es querer que sea culto y moral: trabajar para que tenga luces y virtudes: interesarse en la educación que da unas y otras” (qtd. in García Giráldez 22). In light of *Júpiter*’s instrumentality, Celis

requests that Delgado permit him to take possession of Júpiter. In their first encounter, Celis deploys his rhetoric in order to entice Júpiter into collaborating with the liberals:

Celis: Mando que te sientes delante de mí porque somos iguales. Sin embargo, por un puñado de dinero cualquiera puede adquirirme, azotarte. No eres nadie: te llaman Júpiter, llevas un nombre de perro, a menos que sea el de un dios... y para ser un dios es preciso poseer en absoluto la libertad... Todo en ti, pues, viene a ser irrisión y miseria. (*Júpiter se levanta*).

Júpiter: Señor, si estás ofendido, decid cuál es vuestro designio, y yo evitaré mi infamia y os satisfaré con mi muerte, antes que me dirijáis vuestras burlas sangrientas...

Celis: ¿Yo burlarme de ti? ¿Con qué derecho? ¡No, por Cristo vivo! Por el contrario, ¿qué harías si yo te pidiese que vayas a hablar con los esclavos, artesanos y jornaleros de San Salvador del modo con que yo te hablo ahora? Que les infudieses, como yo a ti, vergüenza de su esclavitud; que les diese armas para acabar con el gobierno de la Colonia y para ser todos iguales y libres?

(Gavidia 45)

Júpiter's concern is that Celis has discovered his desire for Blanca, despite his best intentions at hiding his feelings. Even before meeting with Celis, he has resolved to die for his audacious passion instead of being submitted to the whip, as masters tend to do with his "equals." Standing before Celis, Júpiter's pride leads him to declare the same instead of admitting guilt and groveling at his new master's feet for forgiveness. Celis' rhetoric of equality, on the other hand, is tinged with his feelings of superiority as he

shifts from shaming Júpiter for his vile condition to proclaiming that he should follow the same method in order to bring other black men into the liberal fold. Blanca's interruption into their private conversation fuels Celis' impassioned words:

Celis: [...] ¡Y tú, vil esclavo, escoria, nada!; ¿tú no ardes en cólera como yo?, ¿no te ahogas de indignación? ¡No gritas libertad! ¡¡Tú!! ¿Oye? Santiago Celis tiene su libertad en su pensamiento. Llegará hasta ella rompiendo por la muerte, si la encuentra a su paso... Puedo matar a mi hija antes que ella fructifique en el pantano como flor aciaga... Tú, si amases a una mujer que el destino ha puesto en la cúspide de la babel espantosa, si sólo llegases a pensarlo, serías colgado en la picota y muerto al furor vil del látigo. (Gavidia 50-51)

Celis' broad use of "slavery" appeals to Júpiter's desire to be seen as an equal, even when Celis suggests that nobles are in a worse position than black slaves because they are ignorant of their chains. His suggestion that the master above all others is King Ferdinand VII falls on deaf ears, since Júpiter is only listening to the words that appeal to his desire: that it is necessary to prevent Blanca's arranged marriage. Celis' suggestion that Júpiter would be sentenced to death by the standing social order for coveting a white woman serves to infuriate the slave who, at last, cries "¡Libertad! ¡Rebelión! ¡Abajo el Rey! ¡Muera el arzobispo! Decidme que lo maldiga todo: maldito sea todo" (Gavidia 51). It is passion, not reason that leads this black subject to enter into a covenant with patriotic liberalism.

Francisco Gavidia claimed that his oeuvre was torn by the rational demands of science and reason: "[Se] tiene que explicar la inteligencia, la civilización, el arte, la

tradición de la conciencia, esto corresponde al hombre y a éste respecto son más exactos y filosóficos los grandes poemas de la antigüedad, que nuestros trazos morales, más descendemos de Jehová que del mono” (qtd. in Pleitez 2005). Júpiter’s indecisiveness, misery and regret make him a pitiable character and it is only in tragic moments that he achieves any measure of brilliance. Furthermore, the structure of the national drama serves to emasculate him at the center of a plot whose historical contours would instead suggest a lucid, emboldened figure.

The positivist association of race and passion weakens the liberal basis of Gavidia’s text. As Mario Hernández Aguirre observes, the playwright may have intended to personify the masses through the slave’s character but, in this regard, “literalmente el personaje se le va de las manos, porque al final resulta ser un asesino, con todo y su arrepentimiento. Ni podría asumir la categoría de símbolo popular un personaje cuya conducta está guiada durante toda la obra exclusivamente por las razones privadísimas de su amor por Blanca” (Hernández Aguirre 331). Júpiter understands Celis’ words as a guarantee that a new social order would not shun a union between he and Blanca, a fact beyond the wildest of his dreams and beyond the tropes he has found in the classics he has read. His flaws are brought to the forefront as this illusion gives way to a host of other imagined liberties once he begins to assume his role in the uprising, giving way to impulsive passions. Following the successful recruitment of *morenos* into uprising, Júpiter expresses the need to acquire more arms, vehemently declares that he will buy all of the *aguardiente* in the city and painfully aware of his incipient madness, he reflects: “Las ideas se me suceden en el cerebro: cada una me deja un nuevo ardid” (Gavidia 58).

These fervent words offer a striking contrast to the political motives of the *criollo* forefathers of the nation.

Believing wholeheartedly in the possibility of a socially condoned romance with Blanca, Júpiter withstands imprisonment and torture while keeping his eye on the prize: the freedom to wed the object of his affection: Blanca. In a bold move, he confronts her father and demands that his request be honored. Santiago Celis tells him that he has fulfilled his part of the agreement by proclaiming Júpiter's heroism to the townspeople and kissing the former slave's wounds in public—he is no longer under any obligation to repay him for his service. Júpiter responds:

Júpiter: Me toca hablar. Celis, oíd y retened mis palabras. Preferí la muerte a delatarlos. Yo soy un esclavo; pero tengo en mis manos el poder... Todos tienen en ellas la vida o la muerte. Mirad mi frente: la ha lacerado la corona de hierro del tormento; oídlo, digo, voy a cubrir mis cicatrices con una diadema de oro.

Celis: ¡Oh Celis! Cómo no pude apercibirme de este error espantoso...

Júpiter: Os asombráis... Pues bien, todos mis sufrimientos y ambición tienen un fin: una mujer... (*Lentamente*). Celis, dadme la mano de Blanca.

(Gavidia 161)

Celis deals a fatal blow to Júpiter's pride as he states that he will never consent to such a union, since his loyalty to the independence movement don't change the fact that Júpiter is nothing but a vile slave. Pouring salt in the wound, Celis adopts a paternal tone and pronounces the words that dictate the destiny of blacks in the new republics. It's over, Celis says, "Soldado de la libertad, lucha, muere por ella... El porvenir verá tu raza

igualar los latidos del corazón con los de todas las razas. Así fueron todos los sacrificios; sólo no fructificarán para los mártires... Te hablo compadeciéndote, como amigo, como..." (Gavidia 163). The objective of this drama is clearly manifested in these words, since it strives to negotiate polemics about the colonial past, independence and the future of Central America by constructing a national imaginary—the legacy of future generations—that omits blackness from the collective experience.

In a splendid assessment of *The Tempest*—the second Shakespearean play that clearly informs *Júpiter*—George Lamming observes, "Prospero has given Caliban language and with it an unstated history of consequences, an unknown history of future intentions" (109). Caliban understood speech and concept as the conditions of future possibilities, making this "gift" of language that he has received "the very prison in which Caliban's achievements will be realized and restricted" (Lamming 109). The possibility of a black intellectual achieving the same status as his master, even under utopian conditions is nullified in *Júpiter*. The prospect of transgressing boundaries of compassion is halted by the demise of the black subject who seemingly succumbs to his passions. Irrevocably distraught and betrayed, *Júpiter* murders Santiago Celis after the exchange cited above. He commits suicide shortly after assassinating a distraught Blanca who offered herself to *Júpiter* in the last moments of the play in an attempt to save her father's life, crying: "Vedme. Quiero sanar todas las heridas de vuestro amor y orgullo... Miradme: Blanca de rodillas os ofrece su mano" (Gavidia 170). *Júpiter* stands in striking dissonance with eighteenth and nineteenth century texts. According to Thomas Laqueur, these engendered compassion and called for that compassion to be understood as a moral

imperative to undertake ameliorative action. The nexus of *Júpiter* develops a theory of causation of suffering that depends on the tragic origin and destiny of the black body and its passions.

Júpiter posits that ineptitude, corruption and passion prevent the black subject from fully mastering the codes of reason that he was presumably taught. *Júpiter*'s simultaneous martyrdom and self-defeat fits neatly with the ideologies espoused by the leading classes, since the final scene highlights *Júpiter*'s presence as a threat to the bourgeois liberal order, assuaging any sense of complicity that the intended reader might feel as a result of Celis' contradictory rhetoric. Johannes Fabian reminds the critic that the history of anthropology reveals the use of Time almost invariably is made for the purpose of distancing those who are observed from the time of the observer (25). In the examples I have explored in this chapter, the denial of coevalness with blackness and the denial of the temporal materiality of communication through language is superseded by a detemporalized connection to the visualization-spatialization of the literary masters across the Atlantic. In this literary penetration of literary cartographies, the purpose of rising swells of time and space, the objective of the plenitude of intellectual rapture.

Facing a New Century with a Cosmopolitan Pen

The independence across Latin America sought to establish a definitive break with the Spanish Crown and though this did not result in the *intelligentsia*'s excision from the European literary tradition, it did imply that their work would necessarily negotiate their inheritance whilst determining its own legacy. In his poignant essay, *Dos etapas del pensamiento en hispanoamérica*, Leopoldo Zea declares that Latin Americans

have “accumulated” experiences instead of resolving the problems brought upon by the Conquest, Colonial Administration and the Wars of Independence. As a result, there is a conflictive relationship to Europe that is far from being resolved: “Aún no hemos podido asimilarnos este pasado, porque aún lo sentimos como algo que es ajeno; aún no lo sentimos en nuestras venas, en nuestra sangre, no lo sentimos como propio. O, en otras palabras, este pasado nuestro aún no se convierte en auténtico pasado, sigue siendo un presente que no se decide a ser historia” (Zea 18). When past experiences are not thoroughly assimilated they remain latent and repressed by the subject who cannot face them, resulting in the manifestation of symptoms of the occurrence. These symptoms appear in the very gestures and actions of the subject who interfaces with his society while in the midst of the ever-present past, an uncanny *cauchemar* that does not recede into the background or fade with the passing of time.

These works by Rubén Darío and Francisco Gavidia—two beacons in the modernization of Latin American societies and the coming of age of their literature via *modernismo*—reflect an insistence on moving forward, which was reflected in a drive to create an autochthonous culture, literature and philosophy for Latin America. Both authors concurred in their disdain for blackness and the contamination of socio-cultural vectors in their art. Francisco Gavidia declared that if intelligence, civilization, art and humanism had to be explained, “esto corresponde al hombre y a éste respecto son más exactos y filosóficos los grandes poemas de la antigüedad, que nuestros trazos morales, más descendemos de Jehová que del mono” (qtd. in Pleitez 2005). The black subject and black experience erupt in their lesser-known texts which, as a result of negation and

repression, leave cracks on the surface of an otherwise unblemished body of texts exploring the national question and citizenship. Rubén Darío, whose grandparents were listed in the civil registry as mulattos, declared in his preface to *Prosas profanas*: “¿Hay en mi sangre alguna gota de sangre de África, o de indios chorotega o nagrandano? Pudiera ser, a despecho de mis manos de marqués; mas he aquí que veréis en mis versos princesas, reyes, cosas imperiales...” (*Poesías completas* 472). Blackness did not factor in as a centerpiece of their prolific literary production; it emerged in their writing as part of the bejeweled experience of the modern subject.

The stylization and aestheticization of black experience presented Central Americans with the challenge, indeed a game, of turning a disparaged element into a thing of beauty. To weave references of blackness was to work, as the literary masters before them had done, with the most disparaged of subjects at their service. The Central American authors that have been at the center of this analysis prized Greek and Roman classical rendition of black beauty. They disregarded the images of Africa populated by savages destined to be enslaved in the same manner that they ignored the legend of Africa as a land teeming with monsters—both of these images had circulated in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, when a more fruitful reference also had: the legend of Prester John, descendant of Balthasar and black ruler of Ethiopia who was destined to spread Christianity throughout Africa (Fra Molinero 5). The legend had encouraged Spanish and Portuguese explorers, missionaries and scholars to venture into Africa and filled imaginations with images of treasure troves presided over by a black king. In turn, French, British, Italian and German literatures had divested black characters of historicity

and, as Balthasar Fra Molinero establishes, formulated exotic black characters based on purely literary classical and medieval constructions that located them in fictive spaces outside the boundaries of nation-states.

Ideas of race throughout Latin America in the nineteenth century were mediated by the classic texts of the Enlightenment and in the latter part of the century, the polar opposites of civilization/barbarism along with the criterion of science ushered the relevance of Darwin and Spencer. It was an assumed fact that abolition was a precondition for a modern society, but so was the intellectual's attachment to an ideology of superior and inferior races. This position bears the imprint of coloniality in the manner that the formerly colonized subject reissues the discourses used for her/his subject to power to design an inferior classification to a third subject, thereby marking her/his difference from absolute alterity according to the stipulations of a perceived higher order. In order to avoid collusion with blackness, it was necessary for Central American intellectuals uphold a firm stance in line with the ideas about race that were expressed by European thinkers whose empiricist discourses covered the Americas.

Writing in 1748 David Hume, for instance, wrote: "In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishment, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly" (Hume 33). Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and others who echoed these words in later essays had likewise bequeathed their "objective" observations to intellectuals across the Atlantic and with them, the implicit counsel that any slight step might reduce intellectuals in América to talking parrots. As a consequence, the curiosity about the black body and the

association with the tropics that we read in Nebrija's example of synecdoche in literary is tempered by the need to suppress any possibility of analogy.

The passion for artifice and pristine aesthetics are at the root of nineteenth century Central American representations of blackness, but so is an embedded web of anachronisms by which to read the black body. The objective is to make beauty reign over reason, science and even religious discourse. In doing so, these intellectuals achieved what their much-admired literary masters have accomplished: the triumph of upstaging their multilateral, transatlantic sources. This is what Harold Bloom terms *apophrades*, when "particular passages in *his* own work seem to be not presages of one's own advent, but rather to be indebted to one's own achievement, and even (necessarily) to be lessened by one's great splendor. The mighty dead return, but they return in our colors, speaking in our voices" (141). Rubén Darío and Francisco Gavidia write of blackness with the certainty that their words will be read and that their writings stand as a testament to literary creation in the isthmus. They respond by positioning themselves at the behest of a muse whose penchant for form reigns supreme over explicit rhetorical expositions on the ethno-linguistic bases of power. Anti-imperialist Central American intellectuals face that task in the early twentieth century, as we shall see in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Cartographies and the Mapping of Bodies in Anti-Imperialist Narratives

As models of terrain, maps combine science and aesthetics to represent the state and national boundaries, climate, natural resources, physical features and human and social geography of a given area. At once functionalist and artistic, whether maps or novels, the print product of such endeavors is a political tool rife with ideological and ontological repercussions. As I demonstrate in this chapter, cartography establishes a palpable division between the *mestizo* “interior” and the uncharted spaces of the nation that are imagined as dangerous areas where the rule of law does not reach. Mapping contributes to the growing fragmentation between the “legitimate” citizens of these nations and the liminal citizenry, the black diaspora—the Afro-indigenous Garifuna present in Honduras since 1796 and the West Indian population that arrived in the early twentieth century.¹⁰ The novels *Barro* (1951), by Paca Navas de Miralda, and *Canal Zone* (1966), by Demetrio Aguilera Malta, are anti-imperialist narratives that map the position

¹⁰ The Garifuna story begins in 1665 with the shipwreck of two British slave ships near the island of St. Vincent. The ships transported black slaves to be used as slaves in the British colonies in the area of Martinique, St. Lucia, Granada, Dominica, and Barbados. They were joined in 1675 by slaves who swam ashore after another shipwreck and an influx of runaway slaves, mostly from Barbados. These slaves eventually intermarried with the indigenous Arawak of St. Vincent.

In 1796, the Garifuna people were accused by the British of cooperating with rival French enemies, were driven off the island of St. Vincent and taken by the British to the island of Roatan, part of the Honduran Bay Islands. Over the course of over three hundred years, the Garifuna peoples established communities in present-day Belize, Guatemala and Honduras. At present there are large Garifuna communities in Los Angeles and New York.

and migratory flows of bodies across spaces largely under North American dominion.

The common point of departure for the two novels is their focus on nature and the experience of modernity. In the first section of this chapter, I examine the retrospective glance given to a new mode of production that by the mid-twentieth century had not only characterized the national landscapes of Honduras and Panama, but also had earned Central American nations the pejorative nickname of banana republics. In the second section, I address how these narratives negotiate the black presence within their borders with particular attention to the literary rendition of the historical conflicts between *mestizos* seeking to reclaim these spaces and the marginalized black subjects they confronted. In the third and fourth sections, I explore the anthropological gaze employed in *Barro* and the social realist gaze featured in *Canal Zone* in order to track the mapping of ethno-linguistic privileges of legitimate belonging to the national imaginary. In these texts, blackness is plotted according to the physical boundaries of departments, districts and autonomous zones; both cartography and literature condition sentiments about such fragmentations.

Retrospectives: The Costs of Idealism

Both the banana trade and the negotiations to build a canal through the isthmus became emblematic facets of Central American politics and economics, promoting militarization and the concentration of power in foreign hands. Guatemala became the first banana republic to seal its fate to the United Fruit Company (UFCO) when it hired the corporation in 1901 to manage its postal system. Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Honduras followed in suit, restructuring their countries' armies, economies and labor force to meet

the demands of their new North American business partner. Increased militarization served to protect the interests of the UFCO along the Atlantic Coast, whose investments in railways, docks and port facilities, the Tropical Radio and Telegraph Company and the “great white fleet” facilitated the transport of the fruit to foreign markets.

Correspondingly, by the time the Panama Canal was opened in 1914, the Zone had become a de facto North American colony where the mythic privilege and country-club prosperity of North Americans lured an immigrant labor force. Beyond the boundaries of the Zone, Panama resembled its Central American neighbors with regard to its dependence on agricultural exports (primarily bananas), a reliance on the U.S. market and unequal distribution of wealth concentrated in a tightly knit landed oligarchy.

The anti-imperialist sentiment that characterized professional circles in the Atlantic Coast and the Panama Canal Zone in the first half of the twentieth century reflected an awareness that funding national armies and promoting foreign intervention would stunt civilian leadership (Bowman 155). Organizations such as the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria (1924) were founded across Latin America in response to the need for continental alliances of like-minded political parties. Intellectuals participating in these efforts highlighted the governing classes’ allegiance to the United States, and how “the natural resources which form the riches of our countries are mortgaged and sold, and the working and agricultural classes are subjected to the most brutal of servitude” were exchanged for concessions and loans (Haya de la Torre 129). Actions against Yankee imperialism had as their principal objectives to argue for the political

unity of Latin America and to promote the nationalization of land and industry, two points that are readily recognizable in the two novels that concern this chapter.

Political leaders like Nicaraguan President Don Adolfo Diaz clamored for North American intervention, beseeching their business partners to take pity on the “unfortunate” Central American democracies: “We are weak and we need your strong help for the regeneration of our debilitated land. The hand which your Government generously and fraternally extends to us I accept without reserve or fear” (Diaz and Knox 106). The irony of a debilitated land juxtaposed to the wealth and riches reaped from it by foreigners was not lost onto the intellectuals that wrote about the terrain that had been handed over so easily to the United States. Issuing a call for the solidarity of the oppressed workers and classes of the isthmus, these authors cultivated a retrospective materialist analysis of the human and environmental costs of imperialist exploitation.

As the primary exporting hubs, banana plantations became crucial employment centers for Central American *mestizos* and the main site of struggle over jobs with the black labor force recruited to work for lower wages. *Barro*, set in 1915, highlights the conditions that led to a mass migration of *mestizos* to the Honduran Atlantic Coast. In a similar fashion, *Canal Zone* examines the migrations of workers—*mestizo* and black—to the area following the 1903 Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty¹¹ that ensured the United States’

¹¹ This treaty established the relationship of Panama to the United States following the new republic’s independence from Colombia. Article 1 stipulates that the United States will guarantee and maintain Panama’s independence. Article 2 stipulates that Panama granted to the United States in perpetuity the use, occupation and control of a zone of land under water, the lands and waters outside of it and any islands within the limits of the zone. Article 3 granted the United States all the rights, power and authority over the zone. Article 5 granted the United States monopoly over the construction. Article 7 allowed the United States to purchase any lands, buildings, water rights or other properties in the cities of Panama and Colón. Article 14 stipulated the price and compensation for said rights. Article 18 stipulated that the United States

purchase and control over the Zone. The narrator denounces the role of North Americans in putting the West Indian workers at risk, subjecting them to deplorable conditions and criticizes Yankee refusal to repatriate the workers.

Barro opens with songs of praise to the fertile Honduran lands along the Atlantic Coast, a lush region wherein oranges, grapefruit, pineapple, mangoes, avocados, sour sops, coconuts and bananas grow in abundance. Yet the natural beauty finds its counterpart in the avarice of the populace, for such was the financial opulence that, “en todo el litoral bananero de la Atlántida, obsérvase el mismo movimiento. ‘Corría el oro’ según la gráfica expresión costeña” (Navas de Miralda 13). The observation reminds the reader that even the physical configurations of nature are not natural, that the Central American isthmus has been filtered through systems of thought, culture, language and rhetorical figures that serve as interpretative lenses through which to see nature (Rodríguez 7). Given the political imperative of the historical moment that *Barro* captures, it is fitting that the narrator would express an attitude towards the clash of the materialistic values fomented by this ravaged landscape.

On the subject of the penchant for making easy money on the plantations, with particular attention to the ostentatious spending of the black *costeños* in the region, the narrator observes:

would have the right to use its police and armed forces at its discretion. The 1903 Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty was the second of two treaties that had a profound impact on nature of Latin America-United States relations in the early twentieth century. The first was the 1898 Treaty of Paris. According to Article 1 of this treaty, Spain relinquished claim of sovereignty over and title to Cuba. Upon its evacuation by Spain, it would be occupied by the United States. Article 2 stipulated that Spain would cede to the United States the island of Puerto Rico and any other Caribbean islands in Spanish sovereignty at the time of the treaty. Article 3 stipulated that Spain would cede the Philippines to the United States. Article 9 stipulated that the inhabitants of these former colonies could remain, but their civil rights and political status would be ceded to the United States and determined by Congress.

El derroche de que hacían alarde los campeños de aquella zona, corría parejas con el inagotable riego de dólares. Individuos había que al ensuciárseles la camisa de crepé de china, con valor de diez dólares, preferían al engorro de darla a lavar, tirar ésta a la basura reemplazándola en las tiendas por una nueva. Cualquiera caído recién llegado del interior, usaba en tal época, calzado de la mejor calidad de marca norteamericana o europea. Los sombreros de Ilima y Macholá, tejidos de fibra, industria nacional de los pueblos de tierra adentro, de los cuales llevan el nombre, eran reemplazados de la noche a la mañana, por los elegantes sombreros de vicuña importados o de fieltro y paja, conforme a la estación. (Navas de Miralda 13-14)

The *costeños'* free spending is an affront to the middle-class narrator of the "interior" for whom the *crêpe de chine* material used to make a shirt or blouse remains an unaffordable luxury. The implication of this unequal access to imported goods is that they are within the reach of the ordinary banana laborer because he is paid in dollars. He need not be wealthy to partake in such luxuries. Flaunting is not limited to the *costeño*, however, since even the newly immigrated peasant from the interior wearing ordinary sandals rather than proper shoes is likely to be contaminated by this uncouth behavior.

The debauchery observed in the Atlantic Coast, according to the narrator, is foreign to any self-respecting Honduran of the interior who continues to value locally produced items bearing the names of the towns where they are produced over imported luxuries. Not only is their dignity present in their *preference*, it is also expressed in their controlled consumerism and their intolerance for drinking, gambling and prostitution—

vices associated with the *costeños*. Like other novels written in the genre of banana protest literature, *Barro* sought to “challenge master narratives of progress, modernization, and the transnationalization of capital in Central America, and they constructed an alternate imaginary of social protest from within the banana enclaves—the underbelly of U.S. imperialism in Central America” (Rodríguez 47). This was a clear anti-imperialist stance that nonetheless resulted in dividing the populace in the Atlantic Coast between those whose ideological interests favored intervention and those whose principles were more closely aligned with leftist nationalists.

In *Barro*, North American imperialism has transformed the hearts and minds of the *costeños*, who have become outlandish consumers overnight and thrive in a context where nature and machinery cohabit in order to produce the “green gold” they so ardently seek:

El ruidoso correr de la locomotora empaña la opalina transparencia de las montañas y las tardes costeras, y la jungla cargada de pólenes y savia nueva, pareciera estremecerse al vaivén apresurado de las máquinas que se detienen aquí y allá, recogiendo los pesados racimos de ‘oro verde’ al borde de los extensos bananales. (Navas de Miralda 14)

The novel highlights the omnipresent traces of industrialization and modernization in a tropical context where the relations of production nevertheless remain feudal. The steel locomotives make the lush landscape flinch, for it is nature’s wealth that is being exploited with the power of their engines. In the aforementioned passages, the narrator brings to bear the powerful sway of modernization, following Marshall Berman’s

assessment of the experience: “to be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and our world—and at the same time that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are” (15).

The same enthusiasm fills the opening pages of *Canal Zone*, as Panamanians joyously celebrate their independence with the conviction that this watershed moment will lead to their country’s rapid ascension to the rank of privileged nation:

Vibraba la alegría en los rostros. Sentíase—por todas partes—el fresco bienestar logrado a raíz de la independencia de Colombia. Se asistía a la transformación de un nuevo Panamá. Un Panamá higiénico, hermoso, acogedor. Poco a poco, iban desapareciendo las enfermedades contagiosas, terror de los visitantes de antaño.

(Aguilera Malta 13)

This is an arresting image of Panama shortly after its independence, as modernity and modernization bring with it the sentiment of transformation and of a new Panama being born. The stellar rhetorical maneuver is not lost upon the reader who, equipped with an understanding of the historical implications of Panama’s independence, recalls how Theodore Roosevelt justified the unconstitutional manner in which he took action in his autobiography: “There had been fifty years of continuous bloodshed and civil strife in Panama; because of my action, Panama has now known ten years of such peace and prosperity as she never before saw in the four centuries of her existence” (94). As *Canal Zone* commences its socialist-realist analysis of the consequences of such intervention, the narrative succeeds in challenging any superficial reading of the historical event.

Canal Zone paints an image of a hygienic, beautiful, welcoming Panama. Streets were repaired and new roads were built; there was a growing optimism and dynamism amongst the population and an awareness of diversity resulting from the recent arrival of Jews, Indian “coolies” and North American “Yankees.” Reluctant to condemn the roots of such a flourishing economy, the narrator states that prosperity was in the air and so was the ubiquitous presence of “el yanqui. El yanqui amable, trabajador, entusiasta. Siempre propicio a regar, como la mejor semilla, sus verdes billetes de a dólar” (Aguilera Malta 13). The canal promised everyone—foreign investors, black laborers from the Caribbean island, tourists, military men—wealth and such was its reputation that even rural Panamanians migrated to the cities in hopes of getting a taste of the wealth: “Entonces, se verificó, tácitamente, el éxodo hacia la Capital y hacia Colón. Los campos, poco a poco, se vieron incultos y abandonados. Nadie pensaba en sembrar. Todos quisieron ir a gozar de la buena vida” (Aguilera Malta 14). The interior is abandoned for the promise of the riches trafficked in the Zone.

Canal Zone deftly challenges assumptions that social novels are beset by a certain “simplicity—or, to put it in more brutal terms, the simplistic character of its rhetoric” (Suleiman 73). The lyrical quality of this novel does not sacrifice aesthetics in order to achieve its ethical principles: Marxist ideology, an association with the working class and popular masses, socialist humanism and internationalism and historical optimism. The eloquence with which the narrative is stylized allows it to become a powerful instrument for clearing the capitalist rhetoric that serves as the opium of the people in Panama. Like other novels forged within the literary current of canal literature, *Canal Zone* addresses

the issues of national sovereignty, foreign occupation, and racial identity that result from Panama becoming a transit site from independence (Sepúlveda 31). This defiance of imperialist pursuits likewise calls into question the lines drawn between the agents and subjects that fuel the imperialist drive of the capitalist beast. As a consequence, “progress” becomes a detriment to national agriculture and even more insidious was the belief that the Canal would continue to satisfy the avarice of its exploiters. The robust economy provides prosperity to everyone until the thirst for wealth results in the loss of human lives:

Se escribieron con sangre y con plomo las primeras páginas de ese poema de cemento, mar y acero; cuando el alarido de la dinamita se mezcló con el de los hombres pulverizados; cuando las fiebres traidoras mordieron la negra carne sin protección, y, en racha mortal, la barrieron incesantes; cuando volaron los ceros y, en su vuelo estrepitoso, se llevaron ramilletes de existencia.

Después en la época mala, ¡qué malos habían sido los yanquis! Quienes los acompañaron—verdaderos taladros humanos—fueron marginados. Se les abandonó a su suerte. O se les dieron los peores trabajos. Allí donde se gana poco pero la vida se expone a cada instante. Sobre las fraguas de las grandes fundidoras; dentro de las máquinas aturdidoras y quemantes, que les daban pinceladas de llama a los hombres oscuros; en el engranaje íntimo de las esclusas. Allí como una pieza más, casi sin importancia, en lo infinito de las Máquinas del Monstruo. (Aguilera Malta 38)

North American intervention in Panama is denounced for the political and economic transformations that brought the West Indian population to the Canal Zone. The United States is directly implicated in the permanence and historical marginalization of this population in Panama. For all of those concerned, Panamanians and West Indians, the truth was driven home many years later when it became obvious that there were human consequences to the decision made on the eve of independence. By then, it had become clear, paraphrasing Karl Marx, that they were living in a world where “all that is solid melts in the air.”

The association with Marx is not in the least accidental since, as Ana Patricia Rodríguez demonstrates in *Dividing the Isthmus*, a corpus of social realist texts associated with the production of bananas and the construction of the Panama Canal were published between 1930-1960: “Produced by some of the most outspoken, progressive, and militant writers of Central America, the social protest literature challenged not only the corporate order but also national rule and foreign economic intervention in the isthmus” (13). Rodríguez examines the writings of the Panamanian Joaquín Beleño, the Costa Rican Carmen Lyra, the Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias and the Honduran Ramón Amaya Amador as a unifying discourse across the isthmus that scrutinized the impact of U.S. intervention on local populations. This chapter contributes to the dialogue by examining these two hitherto unexamined texts from an ethno-linguistic lens.

Where Text and Pretext Meet: The Ubiquity of Blackness

Barro, by Navas de Miralda, and *Canal Zone*, by Aguilera Malta, are national allegories whose primary objective is to expunge any belief that the North American

presence in their territories is a benevolent introduction of Honduras and Panama to the international division of labor. Following the words of Frederic Jameson, these novels posit that Central America is “locked in a life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism—a cultural struggle that is itself a reflection of the economic situation of [the third world] in their penetration by various stages of capital, or as it is sometimes euphemistically termed, of modernization” (68). In both narratives, the stories of private individuals and their communities are allegories of the embattled situation of the national culture and society in question with the North American colossus. Race/ethnicity is not a deliberate feature of the materialist considerations of these novels, but black subjects within Central American borders are brought into focus as these narratives map the bodies contracted for the agro-export corporations under fire.

As the opening pages of *Barro* indicate, the lure of higher wages offered by the banana plantations increasingly encouraged *mestizos* from the “interior” to seek employment in the region. Historical documents indicate that this migratory flow created an early and intense competition between Spanish-speaking *mestizos* and black workers that had been recruited from Anglophone Caribbean. Froylan Turcios, an ally of Augusto Sandino, denounced the Immigration Law of 1906 preventing the Honduran government from expelling “members of a race made arrogant by their nationality”—West Indian subjects of the British Empire—and warned against “the possibility that this inferior race might mix with the Indian element” (Euraque 243). Labor leaders associated with the Federación Obrera Hondureña (FOH) established in 1921 by Tegucigalpa artisans, introduced legislation that sought to prohibit “the importation into the territory of the

Republic of negroes of the African race and coolies” (qtd. in Euraque 244). Honduran intellectuals who viewed the US-owned banana companies as a threat to national sovereignty promoted a united *mestizo* front against the Garifuna and West Indian populations, both of whom were perceived as foreign intruders despite their different histories in the isthmus.¹²

Canal Zone likewise situates the reader in a socio-political context rife with conflicts and contradictions, at the center of which is the debate over the importation of a black West Indian labor force. The initial operators of the Canal Zone project were white North American southerners who insisted upon implementing North American Jim Crow segregation measures in the Canal Zone. The white North American labor force was paid on the “gold roll” while West Indians received the “silver roll” rate, distinctions that were later institutionalized in the euphemistically designated “gold” and “silver” towns, schools, toilets, drinking fountains and segregated windows at the post office.

Panamanian indifference to the arrival and implementation of such policies of apartheid was justified under the assumption that the black immigrants would be assigned the most difficult work and nationals would reap the riches of the Canal (Biesanz 774). Since they believed they would be repatriated, as stated in their contracts, West Indians set out to make their fortunes despite the unequal pay and working conditions. Panamanian

¹² According to Darío Euraque, a number of presidents, such as General Vicente Tosta and General Tiburcio Carías, openly opposed black immigration and pledged to oppose black immigrant labor after 1924. In the 1925 elections, Dr. Miguel Paz Barahona advocated for European immigration and the deportation of black immigrants. In 1926, Ramón E. Cruz, a future supreme court justice and Honduran president denounced the “black race” on the North Coast and declared that “the compensation received from black labor could not be compared to the incalculable damage done to our species” (qtd. in Euraque 245).

literature has historically made West Indians the scapegoat and “metaphor” of the race problem in the country under U.S. occupation, blaming them for intervention and neocolonialism, as well as racism (Sepúlveda 41).

Writing outside the parameters of nationalist self-making that creates the identities of citizens by establishing boundaries between self and other in the creation of identities cannot be avoided in this context. As Nancy Leys Stepan observes, scientific and medical discourses provided the framework for such inquiries in Latin America in the early twentieth century. Eugenics was first, “a science of heredity that was shaped by political institutional and cultural factors particular to the historical moment and place in which it appeared” and second, “a social movement with an explicit set of policy proposals that appeared to their proponents to be suggested by, or be logically derived from, hereditarian science itself” (Stepan 10). Argentina, Brazil and Mexico were foremost among those countries with an established interest in eugenics, but the presence of Haitian, Costa Rican, Salvadoran, Honduran, Nicaraguan and Panamanian delegates at Pan American Sanitary Conferences and Pan American Conferences of Eugenics and Homoculture in the early 1930s reveals the broad scope of the appeal of the movement (Stepan 184, 189). The political and scientific institutions in these countries adapted the theory to suit their contexts, conceiving of it as a means of improving the nation by cleansing from the milieu those factors considered be damaging to its citizens’ hereditary health. In those Central American nations where the United Fruit Company recruited a largely black labor force to work on the plantation, the discourse of eugenics became the rhetoric of choice amongst intellectuals who warned the populace as to the impending

doom faced by nations otherwise destined to have a “purer” and more “pristine” genealogical composition.

Fittingly, Dr. Clodomiro Picado of Costa Rica exclaimed in 1939: “OUR BLOOD IS BLACKENING! And if we continue like this, it will not be a nugget of gold that comes out of the crucible, but rather a piece of charcoal” (244). His was an urgent call to rescue the “European sanguineous patrimony” that had saved the country from “falling into systems of African type,¹³ whether in the political or in pastimes that imitate art in distinction in sad and ridiculous styles” (Picado 244). As an alumnus of the Pasteur Institute and director of the national laboratories in San Juan de Dios during the first half of the twentieth century, Picado’s observations stood as expert testimony of Central American intellectuals’ fervent belief in this powerful biopolitical movement. The question that the cultural critic must grapple with is not the simplistic labeling of texts as racist or nonracist, but rather how eugenics became part of the political relations between countries in the isthmus and the extent to which it permeated literary representations of the flow of black subjects across and within national boundaries.

Barro effectively denounces the working conditions of *mestizos* who migrate from the “interior” to the “coast” on the Honduran plantation, yet it omits references to the intense labor struggles between *mestizos* and West Indians in the early twentieth century. In doing so, the novel stands in stark contrast to classics within the genre of the

¹³ From the realm of letters, Rubén Darío had in 1905 already used blackness as an adjective correlated to the mediocrity. In his preface to *Cantos de vida y esperanza*, he writes: “Mi respecto por la aristocracia del pensamiento, por la nobleza del Arte, siempre es el mismo. Mi antiguo aborrecimiento a la mediocridad, a la mulatez intelectual, a la chatura estética, apenas si se aminora hoy con una razonada indiferencia” (*Poesías completas* 529).

*novela bananera*¹⁴ that critically assess the position of black workers vis-à-vis *mestizos* on the plantation. In these novels, West Indians are portrayed as an anonymous, homogeneous mass of brute labor marginal to society and deprived of subjectivity, in stark contrast to the *mestizo* workers, the subaltern subjects struggling for their place in the nation.

When the labor competition between West Indian laborers and *mestizos* in Honduras ensued, the Garifuna returned to the coastline, to their traditional homes and seemingly left plantation work to Hondurans and the West Indians (González 136). As the most “unthreatening” of black subjects in Honduras, this is the group that is overwhelmingly featured in *Barro*. The tone used to describe the Garifuna when they are first presented to the reader is one that belongs most appropriately in an ethnographic or anthropological text. They are said to live on the edge of the sea in a town called Nueva Armenia. The narrator informs the reader that the Garifuna’s homes are built from laced palms and are found through the entire length of the coast, forming small clusters under the shade of the coconut tree. In a tone closely resembling that of an anthropologist, the narrator states:

Los caribes de la costa norte de Honduras, viven de la pesca y de la siembra de tubérculos, yuca y malanga, que utilizan lo mismo que el pescado, como el principal alimento de todos los días. También se benefician del tráfico de los cayucos, fabricados por ellos mismos con madera de caoba y San Juan, abundante

¹⁴ Those texts include Costa Rican Carlos Luis Fallas’ celebrated novel, *Mamita Yunai* (1941). Honduran novels Ramón Amaya Amador’s trilogy: *Prisión verde* (1945), *Biografía de un machete* (1959) and *Destacamento Rojo* (1960) as well as Marcos Carías Reyes’ *Trópico* (1948), which bears a striking resemblance to *Barro* in its defense of Honduran *mestizo* immigrants to the Atlantic Coast; and Miguel Ángel Asturias’ trilogy: *Viento fuerte* (1950), *El Papa Verde* (1954) and *Los ojos de los enterrados* (1960).

en tal región costera, aparte de la pesca y embarcaciones de vela de mayor amplitud que poseen los más pudientes. En estas efectúan periódicamente viajes a la Colonia de Belice, ubicada a lo largo del Mar Caribe. Muchos de éstos se dedican al contrabando de parque, pistolas, jabón, velas, licores y otras mercancías por el estilo, en forma clandestina o de acuerdo con los empleados del Aduana o guarda muelles. (Navas de Miralda 51)

The narrator distances herself by employing an “objective” ethnographic tone from whence moral and cultural observations about the Afro-indigenous group are to be made. Thus, the economic activities of the community are described as illegal activities within informal and subsistence economies. The narrative promotes the idea that the Garifuna are outsiders, a strategy that acts as a smoke screen to the reality that the Garifuna have lived in Honduran territory since 1796 and that *mestizos* have engaged in commerce with them since the community was established.

The presumed objectivity of the statement serves as a veil to the complex involvement of this Afro-indigenous community in the local and national economy of Honduras. The Garifuna’s presence extended beyond the seaside villages like San Juan, Tornabe, Triunfo de la Cruz, and La Ensenada; they owned *ejidal* (community) lands from 1900 into the 1910s where small farmers grew bananas. As Charles David Kepner observed in 1936, *mestizo* Honduran citizens were loath to move to the “fever-infested” Atlantic Coast, and so small planters sold bananas to Italian steamship companies sailing to New Orleans and Mobile even before the UFCO began to invest in the region (53). Darío Euraque explains that with 95% of the country’s black population residing on the

North Coast well into the second decade of the twentieth century, a majority of the early United Fruit Company banana plantation's labor was Garifuna (241). Not only were the Garifuna the first stable black population employed by the United Fruit Company, they posed a threat to it as proprietors of potentially cultivable lands as the company increasingly expanded their business to Garifuna territory along the coast.

In the same manner that *mestizos* joined together to denounce the black diaspora's perceived alliance with the North American enemy in Honduras, *mestizos* organized a movement in Panama around a similar imagined coalition. As George W. Westerman observes in his history of the West Indians in Panama, pressure to assimilate was initially exerted over the 7,000 Jamaican immigrants who first arrived in 1849 and had been contracted to build the Panama railroad (340). When the United States assumed control of the Panama Canal, it also absorbed the 20,000 black men who had held clerical positions for the French company that preceded it. Thus when the North American company assumed rights to the canal building project, West Indians had already been trained in their respective fields, spoke the same language and had a similar religion as that of the North Americans. It was these salient differences that had already marked them as outsiders among the general population, even among Panamanian blacks, and yet made them the most desirable workforce for the North American enterprise.

The hostile response to West Indians was triggered in the early twenties by widespread unemployment. Policymakers claimed that West Indians had taken jobs that rightfully belonged to Panamanians and initiated immigration restrictions and dubbed the black masses "undesirable immigrants" (Biesanz 775). A nationalist movement under the

banner of “Panama for Panamanians” that demanded the West Indian community’s repatriation fastened on the Spanish language as one of the sacred symbols of the homeland. *Canal Zone* takes place in Panama at the height of the backlash against West Indians and addresses the housing disputes that made headlines in that period. In the novel, Panga is one of the many landlords in the city who responds to the rising unemployment, inflation and the call to protect *mestizo* interests by expelling the black tenants from his buildings:

¿Cómo era posible que en Panamá ocurriera eso? Y entonces, ¿dónde estaba la protección de los yanquis? ¿Para qué servían los yanquis? ¿Para qué se les había dado esta faja de terreno y—muchos como él—su consciencia? ¡Cuán distintos eran estos tiempos de los de antes! [...] Ahora cuando lanzaba un *chombo* sobre todo a un *chombo* que tuviera extensa familia, sentía una dulce alegría interior.

(Aguilera Malta 59)

The liberal use of the word *chombo*, a pejorative term used to denote West Indians working in the Zone, and the pleasure garnered from evicting his tenants allow Panga to transfer his anger at the demise of Panama’s economy to the West Indians he believes are accomplices who have encroached upon his land, property and nation.

Since it became increasingly difficult for Panamanians to find employment in the Canal Zone unless they spoke English, the government soon passed legal measures to require all organizations to have Spanish names and conduct business in Spanish.

Business signs had to display their Spanish name first and in larger letters than their English appellation; elementary schools had to conduct all their classes in Spanish and

where English was taught, it was to be done so as a foreign language (Biesanz 775). The movement culminated in the new Constitution of 1941, which stipulated that all children of “prohibited immigrants” who had come since 1903 were to lose their citizenship. Though the constitution of 1946 restored their citizenship, English-speaking immigrants were prevented from immigrating to Panama until 1949.

Writers on Panama faced the challenge of legitimizing the country in the eyes of Latin American intellectuals who, like the Argentinean socialist Alfredo Palacios, considered the country a “Yankee colony” undeserving of respect due to its eminent absorption by the “North American colossus” (Palacios 158, 163). A central concern in the foundational fictions had been to present Panamanians as a unified *mestizo* people in the fashion of the ruralist movement espoused by proponents who deliberately depicted the peasant subject as the basis of their nationalism. The harmony and homogeneity that arose from these folkloric representations meant that, as Peter Szok succinctly observes, blacks didn’t play a part in the conception of *mestizaje* promoted in foundational fictions, despite their demographic dominance during the colony (160). Even when narratives about Panama dealt with ethnic and racial plurality, the project was compromised by the need to assert the country’s Hispanic identity.

Language and nationalism are intimately tied in the Honduran and Panamanian texts captured in *Barro* and *Canal Zone*. Where there were legal measures in place, there was institutionalized racism against the black diaspora. Where literary production was concerned, it served as a space to denounce the usurpation of *mestizo* rights by those who unjustly reaped the profits of Central American nations. While affirming an anti-

imperialist stance, these literatures also reified the designation of privileges along ethno-linguistic lines. Thus, these novels negotiate the possibility of the black diaspora's disappearance from the nation in a strikingly similar fashion. The anthropological gaze in *Barro* and the social realist gaze in *Canal Zone* are parallel maneuvers that result in the designation of the Atlantic Coast as a geographical space of blackness, circumscribing the black body within economic terms.

The Anthropological Gaze in *Barro*

“There is no knowledge of the Other which is not also a temporal, historical, and political act,” asserts Johannes Fabian in the first page of *Time and the Other*. Though the history of anthropology indicates that this discipline contributed to the intellectual justification of the colonial enterprise, its utility has not been limited to intellectuals at the metropolises. The temporal concepts of this Eurocentric discourse—civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization, industrialization and urbanization—derive their conceptual content from evolutionary time and are equally at the behest of intellectuals in the periphery. Thus, when the narrator of *Barro* shifts attention from *mestizos* to the Garifuna of the Atlantic, she does more than just include another group into the narrative. There is a register shift that promotes a scheme in terms of which Honduran cultures are placed in a temporal slope, a stream of Time, that perpetuates the denial of coevalness between the *mestizo* self and the Garifuna other.

The narrator alludes to a gendered division of labor in the Garifuna community that clearly places a heavier burden on women: “Entre los morenos, la mujer es la que más trabaja, la que siembra y cosecha la yuca, en el terreno preparado por su hombre; la

que corta leña y cría los hijos sin taza. Una de las características de la raza negra, es la de reproducirse como ratas” (Navas de Miralda 51). Though the comment is meant to focus on the daily life of women, the anthropological gaze allows the narrator to deftly subtract humanity from the Garifuna by highlighting their reproductive animality. The discourse of feminism crosses the anthropological gaze as the narrator considers the negative effect of a subsistence economy on women. Her comment about reproduction, tinged as it is with the eugenicist discourse, reflects a concern with women’s sexuality at the core of a culture.

More important than the remark itself is what it does with time. As Ernest Gellner observed, the “systematic study of ‘primitive’ tribes began first in the hope of using them as a kind of time machine, as peep into our own historic past, as providing closer evidence about the early links in the great Series” (18). By explaining women’s role in reproduction and daily life, the narrator expects to lay bare the foundation of Garifuna culture in order to arrive at an evolutionary thesis about the transformation of women’s roles in mainstream Honduran circles.

What appears first to be a non sequitur when she changes the topic to the Garifuna diet is actually a continuation of the same reductionist approach. The narrator describes the preparation of a dish called “cazabe” which involves forming a tortilla-shaped mound from grated manioc. The women, once again at the forefront of the gendered division of labor, place these cazabes in a basket that they carry on their head when they set out to sell them. The narrator reminds the reader:

Hay algunas tribus más civilizadas, como las del Puerto de Trujillo y La Ceiba. Celebran rumbosas fiestas de bodas, bailes y ritos, imitando parte de ellos las modas y las costumbres de ladinos o mestizos. El atraso de esta raza, aunque muchos saben leer y escribir en forma elemental, merced a la difusión de escuelas en algunos sectores, ha contribuido mediante influencias ancestrales, a la divulgación de un sinnúmero de prácticas de hechicería, como la magia negra, en las cuales se inspiran—como las tribus salvajes de África u Oceanía—sus danzas rituales de Pascuas y Carnestoladas. (Navas de Miralda 52)

The details prepare the reader for a transition from the daily life of this coastal community to an exposé of the topics relating to the Garifuna that dominate the narrative thereafter, namely witchcraft and African ancestry. By employing the binary opposites of civilization and barbarism, the narrator clearly establishes the “costeños” and “morenos”—both terms used to refer to the Garifuna—as descendants of savages. Though they reside in the Atlantic Coast of Honduras, they are outsiders with no lineage from the “civilized” Honduran groups. As references to Pocomania¹⁵ and Carnival are made more explicit, the attempt to disassociate the Garifuna with national culture is made clearer.

¹⁵ Pocomania, also spelled Pukumina, is an African-based traditional religion that emerged in Jamaica in the 1860s. Religious syncretism is a feature of the religion, which holds that the Holy Ghost is the sole mediator between God the Father and humankind (eliminating the idea of Jesus Christ as intermediary). The idea of the experience of the Spirit has ritualistic implications, since a core belief of Pocomania is the coexistence of the spiritual and temporary world. One knows one’s identity through relationship with these spirits, which all have the ability to possess and merit respect. Major rituals include street meetings and rituals for specific purposes, such as feast tables, altars and baths. Prayer rituals involve Bible reading, hymn signing and discussion. As a myth of return, Pocomania highlights the concept of a physical and/or metaphoric return to Africa. For more information, please see the entry “Pocomania” in *African American Religious Cultures* (2009).

The narrator describes these customs for a *mestizo* reader who does not have firsthand knowledge of them. In doing so, she appeals to a sensibility that will be awestruck by, for example, the descriptions of the masks and headdresses worn for Holy Week and Pentecost. Most importantly, they are written by an outsider for an outsider, as if the Garifuna culture were a newly “discovered” African or Oceanic exotic tribe:

Usan caretas a cual más horripilantes, amén de unos aparatos formados con delicadas varillas de Madera muy fina que llevan en la cabeza, simulando grandes cestos, edificios, globos, torres, barcos y demás figuras caprichosas y extravagantes. Los adornan con sonajas diversas, espejitos minúsculos y guindajos de toda especie, a fin de que al movimiento del baile o brincoteo, éstos hayan de producir un ruido escandaloso y ensordecedor. Usan vestidos cortos de colores llamativos para dichos rituales y en pedazos de cáñamo ensartan asimismo caracoles y conchas marinas en gran profusión, formando ajorcas para los brazos, las pantorrillas y los pies. También agregan alrededor del aparato ornamental que llevan sobre la cabeza, cintas de colores chillones como de metro y medio de largo, todo lo cual simula un conjunto estrafalario y demoníaco. (Navas Miralda 52-53)

This serves to reinforce the image of the dislocated quality of the Atlantic Coast and the Garifuna as a region and a people severed from the cultural, social and political attributes of the national imaginary. The result—in regards to reception of the text—is of particular interest when one considers that its intended reader is invested in understanding how

labor issues impact the *mestizo* population and the socio-economic implications of Honduras's agro-export economy on the nation's future.

The narrator affirms that the Garifuna all gather in groups, dancing to rhythms that “deben tener un sentido especial, desconocido para los ladinos” in street corners, outside the homes of the wealthy and in the port of Trujillo. Taking a retrospective glance to the economic boom, the narrator describes magnates throwing down packets of *soles*¹⁶ from their balconies to the dancers as they move their bodies to the rhythm of “canciones guturales o jerigonzas en su propio dialecto, al compás del pito y la timbala” (Navas de Miralda 53). The moral implications of these practices are alluded to when the narrator affirms that these earnings are given to the leader of the group who purchases *aguardiente* in abundance—the suggestion being that it is spent on alcohol rather than serving the purpose of improving the group's living conditions.

Even when these festivities are celebrated within the framework of the Catholic faith, the heathens fall into to wild fornication, considered the basest of immoral actions by the observer: “Finalizan las fiestas pascuales con orgías desenfrenadas, acompañadas de diversas ceremonias de magia negra, de contenido escalofriante y satánico, las cuales hubieron de ser prohibidas un poco más atrás del tiempo que situamos estos relatos, o sea a principios de siglo” (Navas de Miralda 53). Not only are the community's actions morally judged by the narrator, they are presented in a matter that presumes the objectivity of truth. As Pierre Bordieu observes in his classic *Outline of a Theory of*

¹⁶ The national currency of Honduras today is the *lempira*, named after the indigenous Lenca warrior who led a number of successful attacks against Spanish colonizers. The currency was changed from the *peso* to the *lempira* in 1931.

Practice, “objectivism constitutes a social world as a spectacle presented to an observer who takes up a ‘point of view’ on the action, who stands back so as to observe it” (96). By transferring into the Garifuna community the principles of her high position in the social structure, the narrator strengthens the suggestion that there is no coevalness between the two worlds.

The benevolent *mestizos* who arrive in the Atlantic Coast with dreams of wealth and riches are contaminated by the greed from the abundance of the green gold available in the coast. Even more alarming, the “costeños” and “morenos” living in the coast taint them by exposing them to witchcraft and occult practices. When Carmela, a young *mestiza* newly arrived in Trujillo loses her virginity to a Salvadoran laborer, she and her family consult with a Garifuna medicine man to restore her dignity: “Entre los de la Costa Norte, no dejan de haber vividores de ambos sexos, gentes desalmadas y versadas en prácticas de ‘hechicería,’ mestizos y de color, que se encuentran en dichos conglomerados tan heterogéneos, plagados por la ignorancia y accesibles a toda clase de inmoralidades, producto de la superstición (Navas de Miralda 83). As the narrator penetrates the practices of Pocomania, the narrator describes rituals that have been introduced with the African-derived religion that is now practiced along the Atlantic Coast:

Además del ritual de oraciones e imploraciones a falsas deidades, al espíritu de Satán o el Diablo, se valen estos traficantes de raros amuletos, siendo los más usados los muñecos de cera acribillados con alfileres por medio de los cuales, el entendido en la materia o brujo, provoca en la persona enemiga que pretende

dañar, fuertes Dolores o retortijones, según el órgano o parte del cuerpo que dicho muñeco tuviese agujereado... También hacen uso tales individuos de ciertas plantas afrodisíacas, algunas de las cuales—según versiones—idiotizan al que las toma, cuando no suscitan en él mismo, graves estados patológicos sexuales o accesos de vesania o locura furiosa. (Navas de Miralda 83)

National identity is solidified in this text by demarcating the lines of the “rational” and the “irrational” and by correcting the gray areas by attributing responsibility to the black diaspora and absolving the *mestizos* by explaining their accidental exposure to immorality. As alterity is associated with primitivism, so too are the geographical boundaries put in place by nature and aggravated by the unwillingness to connect the two worlds and join them as one in the national imaginary. The branding of black bodies ensures that the reader closes the text with a firm resolve that although the spatial distance between *mestizos* and Garifuna has been reduced by the new mode of production that draws *mestizos* from the interior to the coast, the fact remains that the distances in evolutionary time cannot be breached. The anthropological gaze permits the narrator of *Barro* to revisit Honduran labor history and to relegate the black bodies of the Garifuna to the margins of the formal economy. The politics of the anthropological gaze weigh heavily in this text where, by making the contributions of West Indians invisible and by highlighting the primitiveness of the Garifuna, the narrator makes a clear designation between the plotting of “productive” *mestizo* bodies and “inefficient” black bodies in the landscape of the Atlantic Coast.

The Social Realist Gaze in *Canal Zone*

The novels of the early twentieth century, observes Richard L. Jackson in his *Black Literature and Humanism in Latin America*, attempted to negotiate the concepts of civilization and humanism in their quest to examine the nature of Latin American identity. The critical scenes of *Canal Zone* explore the economic hardship faced by the West Indians in the Zone through an unvarnished image of the community's struggle for survival. The black masses described in the text are vulnerable to discrimination and unjust practices because they are paralyzed by fear, "un miedo animal a lo desconocido" (Aguilera Malta 55). Meanwhile, the oppressors capitalize on the immigrants' inability to organize themselves. The landlords they met had forgotten old rivalries and differences of social class. They recognized "el peligro común" and erected therefore a solid front against their black foes (Aguilera Malta 65). The lack of consciousness-raising is pivotal since, lacking the cultural capital at the disposal of Panamanian *mestizos* and unable to return to Jamaica from whence they had arrived, the black masses were doomed to languor in their plight.

The "attitude of concern for the welfare and dignity of human beings, especially the 'marginal' ones, and for the problems that beset them in this life" that pervades the novel highlights the injustices to which West Indians have been subjected (Jackson xiii). Forced to leave the major cities, these immigrants must seek refuge in the savannah. The dispossession of the black masses is poetically described, as the narrator uses the text as a canvas on which to paint the human stains that, "vetazos de ébano a la piel de la tierra uniforme. Manchas humanas incontables. A lo lejos, parpadeaba el incendio de los

colores chillones de sus trajes” (Aguilera Malta 60). The narrator continues, describing a savannah that trembles with every new black stroke indicating the arrival of a new *chombo*. The human stench in the savannah refocuses the reader’s attention to the particularities of such misery: “Olía mal. No sólo por sus cuerpos sucios, inlavados durante muchos días; no sólo por sus propios alientos, que, como una red invisible, aprisionaban el ambiente” (Aguilera Malta 61). These masses, initially recruited to work in the Canal Zone, have become lumpenproletarians who, without a voice, a worker’s movement and without the possibility of being repatriated, are destined to destitution and humiliation on Panamanian territory.

Unlike the Panamanians against them, they are neither active in the anti-imperialist struggle against the United States’ control of the canal nor can they be partial to the nationalist cause. White and *mestizo* Panamanians are the masters of the means of production in an economy where the protagonist Coorsi and his mother struggle to survive. In contrast to her son, she is a first-generation immigrant whose passivity resembles those of her generation: “Para ella todo tenía el mismo color uniforme, el mismo horario cotidiano. Aún cuando el griego llegaba borracho y la insultaba, aún cuando le pegaba, ella conservaba su pasividad extremada, su tranquilidad de esfinge de ébano” (Aguilera Malta 13). Her stoic dignity is an asset to her role in the informal economy since, as a laundress, she toils on a daily basis under the harsh sun in the company of other black women who bear the weight of their color and gender: “En el patio húmedo y gris, repiqueteaba el jadeo de las lavanderas *chombas*, encucilladas, mostrando sus piernas gruesas y vigorosas. El Sol les arañaba las espaldas, les encendía

el rostro y les lamía cruelmente los senos” (Aguilera Malta 51). Like the poetic image of the masses setting up camp in the savannah after being expelled from the city, this image reflects the crude reality of the masses. Among the questions raised by first generation immigrants is whether they can respond to the need for organized consciousness-raising in time to save themselves from the *mestizos* who view them as the enemy and the North Americans who profit from their sweat and blood.

Their immigration status seems to determine their destiny and, as the narrator explores blackness further by bringing into focus the protagonist, he raises the question of legitimate belonging to the national landscape by highlighting the Panamanian-born black subject. Pedro Coorsi, the son of a Greek immigrant and a *chomba*, is laid off from his job as a typist for the local newspaper when economic crisis strikes Colón. He finds himself unemployed and unable to support his mother and roams the streets lamenting his economic situation and his inferior ethnic status. His predicament is made clear in a statement made by his mother as she symbolically washes a white suit, reflecting on her son’s unemployment and his desperate fight against the obstacles that lie in wait to crush his spirit: “Algo contra lo que no podía levantarse. Ni siquiera protestar. Ella lo había visto frecuentemente en los hombres de su raza. Pedro llevaba inútilmente ese poquito de sangre blanca. La sangre negra imperaba, era más fuerte. Y tenía que arrastrarlo al precipicio” (Aguilera Malta 52). Black men, she resolves, are cursed with the self-awareness of their color that brings them closer to death.

Canal Zone posits that Pedro Coorsi’s only saving grace as a result of his black blood is in the sexual realm and particularly in situations involving dance and music

where he “sentía resucitar dentro de sí la fiebre de su madre *chomba* y vibraba en el apretón de carnes de su pareja” (Aguilera Malta 50). This foreshadows the climax of the novel, where it becomes clear in the demise of the black male subject that the apparently humanistic drive of the opening pages of the novel has been exhausted. While *mestizos* rile against the economic downturn brought about by imperialism, it is the flesh and not Marxist analysis or anti-imperialist critique that moves the black male subject. The rhetorical strategy at hand recalls the words of Frantz Fanon: “Black Magic, primitive mentality, animism, animal eroticism, it all floods over me. All of it is typical of peoples that have not kept pace with the human race. Or, if one prefers, this is humanity at its lowest” (126).

The object of Pedro Coorsi’s desire isn’t another black body, but the white body of a woman who mocks him when she sees him sitting between two white men in a car. His unconsummated desire for her takes center stage as the narrative attempts to penetrate the black male’s psyche, resulting in a reading that highlights romantic and sexual obsessions. Pedro Coorsi walks through Colón oblivious to his situation determined by unemployment, xenophobia and imperialism.

¿Cuándo podría él conseguir, no ya que lo amase sino que lo tolerase, simplemente, que su presencia no le fuera risible, repugnante? Se sintió impotente, pequeño, miserable [...] cuándo iba la señorita Linares a saber que ese Coorsi que la amaba era un *chombo* cualquiera, que no tenía ni qué comer? ¿Cómo podría imaginar tal atrevimiento? (Aguilera Malta 54-55)

In submitting to his delirium, Pedro Coorsi upholds the axiom that “emotion is completely Negro, as reason is Greek” (qtd. in Fanon 127). Pedro Coorsi is driven by a white object of desire rather than political commitment or a desire for upward social mobility and thus, despite his insistent questions, he is unable to see himself out of his predetermined “checkmate” situation. As Frantz Fanon reminds us, narratives of men as subjects of reason are not acceptable: partaking in reason is futile, the black man cannot simply say, “I think, therefore I am,” because he is trapped by preconceptions about the inherent passion that fills his black body.

Following his two-week engagement with the failed grassroots movement that sought justice for the black immigrants who were expelled, Coorsi is hired as one of the many chauffeurs serving the 40,000 newly arrived North American Marines on a mission to quell any disturbances. While the white Panamanian aristocracy prepares for balls hosted in honor of the North Americans, Pedro Coorsi assumes the role predestined by his color and class:

Pedro Coorsi—marginal, como la mayoría de los *chombos* había conseguido, por fin, trabajo. Era chofer de un carro destartalado, que se especializaba en llevar marinos de uno a otro lado. Parapetado tras el volante, él lo había visto todo. En Balboa, en los muelles, frente a cantinas y los cabarets, en las calles trepidantes y encendidas de sol. (Aguilera Malta 82)

Painfully aware of his position vis-à-vis the foreigners who are eagerly greeted by the white Panamanians, Coorsi drives along thinking about the futility of his existence:

“siempre el volante. Su mundo, hoy, mañana, siempre el volante. Volante, cadena. Auto,

cárcel. Yanquis que pasean en auto, centinelas” (Aguilera Malta 94). Unlike his mother and the first-generation immigrants who endure the harshness of their daily lives without complaint, Pedro Coorsi feels the sting of alienation. Born in the Zone, he is a Panamanian citizen but one that is subject to the racism of his countrymen as well as that of the foreigners. His passengers, U.S. Marines, are oblivious to his resentment, since they have never considered the possibility of an inferior subject being plainly conscious of his position amongst them. As the scene is depicted, a high level of intimacy is established between the narrator and the reader who curiously awaits an answer to the question of the black subject’s negotiation of the gazes that scan his body.

The “fact of blackness,” a position outside the parameters of social realism and nationalist leftist politics, is a fitting metaphor for the fateful night when a Puerto Rican Marine named D’Acosta decides to amuse his white friends by inviting Pedro Coorsi, the token black man, to the table. The white men are disappointed and bored with the stern black man before them: “Hubieran querido verlo hacer movimientos acrobáticos de simio. Que riera a mandíbula batiente, enseñando los dientes blanquísimos. Que rompiera algo, en un desbordamiento animal. Se sentían defraudados” (Aguilera Malta 95). The black man’s body/color is a uniform that marks him as a native of a colony and as someone expected to “act” in a certain way, responsible for his ancestors. No exception made for his refined manners; the fact of being black obliterates his achievements: “I was expected to behave like a black man—or at least like a nigger” (Fanon 114). The uneasiness caused by Pedro Coorsi’s unyielding demeanor makes the Marines defensive. They are forced to come face to face with a man who, for the sole reason of being black,

should have “known” to perform his blackness, *qua* clown or rabid animal, for their amusement.

D’Acosta calls a mulatta prostitute to dance with Pedro Coorsi, calculating that this will allow him to save face. As the dance becomes increasingly sensual, the black man proves to his spectators, and the intended reader to a certain extent, that they were correct in the assumption of the difference inherent in his color:

La mulata jadeaba. Cada trozo de su cuerpo se esforzaba en seguir la cadencia. Se refregaba, en apretón tumultuoso, contra el cuerpo de Coorsi. Se sentía la fogata de sus caderas agitadas. Y el ritmo invitaba, sugestionaba, mareaba. Coorsi también empezaba a jadear. A hacer suyo el movimiento de la hembra. A ratos se detenían, adheridos. Temblaban ligeramente, como si quisieran exprimirse. Y después continuaban más rápido. Más ágiles. Más rítmicos. (Aguilera Malta 96)

Pedro Coorsi submits to the music under the vigilant gaze of the white men at the table. He emerges from the musical trance shamefully aware that he has “submitted” to the black blood that courses through his veins and curses his life. Being an anti-imperialist text, *Canal Zone* faithfully retains the denunciation of North American activities at the political and socio-economic levels through the end of the novel, as indicated in this encounter. Yet, while it seems inexcusable that the Marines mock Pedro Coorsi, the “fact” of the black body and black desire is evident in these critical passages. It is a problematic claim to a narrative so deeply invested in the ethical denunciation of North American imperialism, but not inconsistent when the reader takes into consideration the unequal distribution of privileges across the lines of color and tongue in the Zone.

Reason dictates that a black man should be equal to a white man in humanist and socialist thought, but in fact, he is relegated to the “irrational,” a traumatizing situation for the black subject who wishes to embody “reason.” Rather than being drawn into the leftist fold or into a viable political movement advocating for the rights of others, this humiliation serves as a catalyst for Pedro Coorsi’s sudden awareness of the role of his blackness in the context of a Panama broiling with anti-imperialist and xenophobic feelings:

Los negros trabajando para que los barcos de los blancos no pasaran por el estrecho de Magallanes; los negros, como verdaderos puentes para unir dos océanos; la estridencia de sus carnes alborotadas, como polvo, con el jadear estruendoso de la dinamita; las enfermedades traidoras que desaparecieron a los pocos sobrevivientes de la épica hazaña. Después acá, en la ciudad, los mismos negros haciendo calles para que las transitaran otros. Casas para que las habiten otros... Siendo odiados. Formando un mundo aparte: un mundo de Chorrillo y de Calidonia, o el de los barrios marginados de la Zona. (Aguilera Malta 102)

Pedro Coorsi’s destiny and that of his community has been predetermined: the fact of their blackness predicts an arduous existence to which there is no escape other than death. Finally, Coorsi slams his car, committing suicide and killing the Marines in the process, after uttering the words quoted above.

Recalling the opening words of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, violence projected against the agents of imperialism is necessary: “National liberation, national reawakening, restoration of the people to the Commonwealth, whatever the

name used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is always a violent event” (1). Yet, when violence is channeled to the self-destruction of the colonized subject—to the black subject broken by oppression—that annihilation serves the established order rather than the redemption of the marginalized.

The framework of the narrative allows the reader to empathize with the black immigrants, particularly on the basis of the foreign domination over this region and the Panamanian nation as a whole. It calls on the *mestizo* reader who, like the narrator, is an outsider to the West Indian immigrant community to examine the costs of engaging in business with the Yankee enemy. The black community—a group that is destined to be perpetually perceived as a foreign body clustered in their designated geographic location—owes their predicament to the North American Canal company that recruited them and refused to repatriate them. As subjects that are never fully integrated in the national and political economy, they are the dispossessed masses now marooned on the shores of the Panamanian national imaginary. As national allegory, the last words of the novel are striking: “Al poco tiempo, todo el mundo se olvidó de Pedro Coorsi. Nadie volvió a hablar más de él” (Aguilera Malta 102). With these words, the novel seems to critique the Panamanian political imaginary which, pummeled out of labor relations, is predicated on the oblivion of its black subjects.

The Central American Experience of Literary Mapping

Hegemonic cartographic projects conceal abstract notions of the locus of power over spaces as well as the practice of redrawing maps years after those social systems were altered. Maps that plot bodies over space and time challenge the innocuous

appearance of maps and highlight the processes by which the most innocent of symbols have an intended ideological effect. With their focus on the Central American experience of space and time, the human cartographies drawn in anti-imperialist narratives excel in articulating the feature of the Atlantic Coast and the Canal Zone where vested political and economic objectives keep the spaces hidden from the purview of the legitimate citizen. Who inhabits these areas, what they do whilst they are there and what are the driving forces of a consistent migratory flow are key elements to the practice of mapping bodies in these hazy spaces.

Factually speaking, there were few roads that connected the Honduran “interior” to the Atlantic Coast at the time of *Barro*’s publication. It was written ten years before the first paved road in Honduras and to return to the interior after having failed to amass the fabled green gold of the coast, a family would have had to walk fourteen days through the Atlántida and Olancho jungles (Griffin 2001). Plainly stated, the Zone belonged to the United States and the core of its populace did not hold Panamanian citizenship at the time of *Canal Zone*’s publication. As the 1964 *Time* article proclaimed, it was “more American than America” and a few Zonians even boasted that they rarely crossed the border “to the other side.” These two novels, then, served to map the origins and transit points of migratory flows and to track the bodies—and their position in the formal and informal economies—in the farthest reaches of the Honduran and Panamanian national imaginaries. These literary mappings of peoples represent, in essence, the mastery of space and time at the service of a symbolic connection to Central America.

CHAPTER 4
Mesoamerica, Citizenship and the Politics of the *Indígena/Negro* Divide

Mesoamerica. The area that today encompasses southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and parts of Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Mesoamerica. The area over which the Spanish and British empires laid borders that were succeeded by those of the Central American nations we recognize today. As Francisco Lizcano Fernández notes, an Ibero-American identity unifies those countries where Spanish is the official language and the majority of the inhabitants claim their belonging in varying degrees to four predominant groups: indigenous, *mestizo*, *criollo* and mulatto (41). Belize stands as the sole exception, since it is here where the majority of the inhabitants lay claim to a *mestizo* identity properly associated with Ibero-America and a *créole* identity commonly associated with the Anglophone Caribbean (Lizcano Fernández 41). The purpose of this chapter is to magnify the Guatemala-Belize boundary in order to examine the *indígena/negro* divide that is at stake in the rightful claim to Central American belongingness. As the sole *indomestizo*¹⁷ nation, Guatemalan elites must assume the task of negotiating and crafting an identity based on the implications of the

¹⁷ Francisco Lizcano Fernández identifies El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua as *mestizo* countries; Guatemala as an *indomestizo* (with preeminence of both *mestizo* and indigenous ethnicities) country; Costa Rica as a *criollo* country; Panama as an *afromestizo* (composed of *mestizo* and *mulato* peoples) country. While there exist *afrocriollo* (consisting of *criollo* and *mulato* peoples) elsewhere in Latin America—Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Brazil—Lizcano Fernández does not find this ethnic identification in Central America. Belize, he states, is fundamentally *creole* and *mestizo* and different from the aforementioned nations.

nation's connection to a brilliant Mayan past—let us remember the importance of Tikal and Iximche, capital of the post classic Kaqchikel Maya until 1524. Aligning itself with the Caribbean, Belize rises as a nation strategically aligned with Caribbean blackness.

Guatemala's indigenous past and present ensures that the country features prominently as a paradigmatic Testimonial People in the Central American imagination, while the tendency to exclude Belize from the region's intellectual tradition is an altogether common practice. Salvadoran writer Jacinta Escudos shares how maps, being ideological apparatuses, condition the sentiment that Belize is a territory that has been in many ways excised from the rest of the isthmus:

Un último recuerdo de infancia: cuando estaba chiquita y nos hacían dibujar el mapa de Centro América, la parte correspondiente a Belice o no se dibujaba o se coloreaba con franjas transversales para indicar que allí ocurría una situación “especial”. Es colonia inglesa, decían mis profesores de primaria. Alguno pensará que estos recuerdos personales son inoportuna vanidad mía. Pero sirven para ilustrar el origen de algunos vicios actuales, como es el de excluir en el pensamiento regional a Belice. (Escudos 1)

Mestizos learn that Belize is a spurious anomaly in Central America, as it carries with it the burden of its outward symbols—a different official language, racial composition and a dependent status amongst nations that claimed their independence in 1821. Guatemala, however, is an iconic gem with its twenty-one indigenous languages and outward symbols as a multi-ethnic and pluricultural country, in spite of the historical marginalization and continuous genocide of indigenous peoples. In essence, indigeneity

and blackness are two social imaginary constructs that lie at opposite ends of a continuum of alterity and only the former can be neatly situated in Central American national imaginaries.

This chapter examines the borderland identities cultivated in Miguel Ángel Asturias' *Mulata de tal* (1963) and David Ruiz Puga's *Got seif de cuin!* (1995). Both novels straddle the *negro/indígena* divide and offer the possibility of a fruitful analysis of the place of these two identities in the Central American intellectual imagination. In both cases, we are invited to consider indigeneity and blackness against the backdrop of the fragmented nation-state. In the first section, I examine *Mulata de tal* as a novel that seeks to affirm an *indomestizo* identity in the wake of a crucial coup d'état in Guatemalan history, and in the second section, I analyze *Got seif de Cuin!* as a novel that affirms Mayan identity through the designation of Belize as a colony and later as a nation-state. I find that blackness is posited a metaphorical and a tangible threat to the indigenous subject: the first novel works with blackness as a coefficient of monstrosity while the second novel crafts it as a destabilizing factor.

Black and Indigenous Subjections: On Being Ethnic in Guatemala

Miguel Ángel Asturias is widely recognized as an emblematic figure in Guatemala's cultural, nationalist and modernizing debates from the end of the 1940s until his death in 1974. Indigenous cosmologies are central to *Leyendas de Guatemala* (1930) and *Hombres de maíz* (1949), while Asturias promotes a specifically *indomestizo* identity in *Mulata de tal* (1963). This is a novel "en la que Asturias exterioriza de manera explícita su intencionalidad intermestizadora al fabular mitos, leyendas e historias orales

americanas en una textualidad poblada también de vertebrales tradiciones europeas” (Morales 935). The *mestizo* and indigenous worlds form a single entity in the rural context where Guatemalan identity is molded. Asturias leaves behind the themes of his most celebrated novels and, as Arturo Arias observes, dedicates himself to a literary experiment that transgresses his previous achievements, that which had already garnered accolades in the world of letters (806). Written during the author’s exile after the fall of the Jacobo Árbenz¹⁸ government, the novel’s *indomestizo* approach directly challenges the anti-communist and racist postulates of the succeeding regime.

The military coup, which established a repressive regime that maintained the neocolonial social and economic structures of US dependency and internal colonialism, reaffirmed in the middle and upper classes racist attitudes towards the indigenous peoples of their nation. Asturias understands the lack of national unity in Guatemala to be the product of an ethnic crisis, a conflict between the nation-state and civil society and the lack of a signifying system to articulate the contending parties: “De allí que, a su modo de ver, la literatura juegue un papel central en la constitución de una cultura nacional que homogenice las diferencias, estetizándolas en un espacio simbólico meta-ideológico que cree símbolos nacionales para uso cotidiano y disfrace hasta cierto punto la naturaleza disfrazada de la nación” (Arias 809-810). Thus, Asturias uses his unparalleled role as

¹⁸ According to historian Héctor Pérez Brignoli: Colonel Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán became president in 1951 during a tumultuous phase in Guatemalan politics (130-131). Internal affairs had become increasingly polarized as a result of a more organized reaction by landowners and the more visible presence of workers union and the newly organized Communist Party (1949). Arbenz put forth the Agrarian Reform Act of 1952, aimed at large landowners holding over 90 hectares (224 acres) of land—a law that affected the vast holding of the United Fruit Company, which had benefitted from concessions offered by previous Guatemalan presidents. After appealing to Washington, the United States depicted Guatemala as a Soviet satellite and approved a CIA invasion of Guatemala, operation PBSUCCESS, from Honduras. Arbenz was forced to step down in 1954.

Guatemala's most renowned intellectual to demonstrate that Guatemala is a country divided along *mestizo* and indigenous lines and that national crises are the product of that unsolved partition. I can easily agree with this diagnosis. However unintended, it has a black hole: it excludes the black diaspora, and that merits closer attention.

The title character's ethnic identification notwithstanding, the protagonists of the novel are an indigenous couple named Celestino Yumí and Catalina Zabala. They are an impoverished pair, described at length for the purpose of highlighting their dejection in this rural setting:

Él con sombrero como resplandor, echado hacia la nuca, todo el relente de la tarde empapándole las sienes de olor a palo de bálamo, los pies desnudos, escamosos y ligeros, el brazo en que llevaba el machete echado a la espalda, y el otro doblado al frente cuando humaba. Y ella, terciado el rebozo sobre el hombro derecho, fustanes y enaguas salmón recogidos en la faja corinta, para no arrastrar cola, las trenzas largas y los pies también desnudos levantando tierrita al avanzar, medio de las puntas de los dedos sin asentar casi los talones. (*Mulata* 9)

Celestino and Catalina bear the symbols of indigeneity, from the classic description of the indigenous woman's light step to the way in which she sleeps next to her husband on a straw mat: "[Catalina], su costilla dormía junto a él en el suelo, sobre un petate de tul, cada cual tapado con su cobija de lana colorida, colores y figuras contra los malos sueños" (*Mulata* 11). Echoing passages from Asturias' earlier works, *Mulata de tal* replicates the same sentiment about social, cultural and political place of indigenous peoples. Recalling the observations made by Darcy Ribeiro, they are the plundered

peoples of history who face the challenge of negotiating the opposing European and autochthonous ideologies they have inherited and who are “distinguished by the presence of values of the old tradition they have preserved and that have bestowed on them the image they present” (74). As Testimonial Peoples, their identities are a result of the socio-cultural factors that frame their subjectivity: “centuries of subjugation or of direct or indirect domination have deformed them, pauperizing their peoples and traumatizing their whole cultural life” (Ribeiro 73). Though they bear these signs of indigeneity in the opening pages of the novel, the course of the narrative emancipates them from the painful socio-economic factors that would render their experience painful. Gone is the forced labor on plantations, the cultivation of maize, the hateful *ladino* society and the cult to the ancestors in the highlands of Guatemala. Asturias invites the reader to envision a world where “the men of maize” have ceased to be defined by the toil of their bodies.¹⁹

A note about the plot before we delve further into an analysis of indigenous and black bodies: in the first pages of the novel, the reader learns that Celestino has agreed to sell Catalina to the devil in exchange for the riches that will lead him out of poverty. He finalizes the deal, and becomes the richest man in the village overnight. Shortly thereafter, he meets a mulatta who owns a talking doll named Lili Puti²⁰ who is actually Catalina. This is the first of many transformations and name changes; to simplify a saga that involves over thirty transformations, I will continue to use our indigenous

¹⁹ The conceptual direction of this chapter limits the development of this hypothesis, particularly as it relates to the underworld and the eventual destruction of the protagonists and their community. I likewise interested in examining what the many inversions of subject positions mean vis-à-vis sexual desire. I am pursuing these lines of analysis in a future publication.

²⁰ Arturo Arias notes that the obvious intertextual play with Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* highlights the political aspect of the text (236).

protagonists' original names. Catalina and Celestino conspire to trap the mulatta—who never acquires any other name nor undergoes transformation—in a cave and proceed to enjoy their riches. They make another deal with the devil in order to bring Catalina to her human size, but this results in her transformation into a giant and Celestino's transformation into a dwarf. As they embark upon their odyssey throughout the course of the novel to continue enjoying their riches and correct each transformation gone wrong, Celestino and Catalina make pacts with supernatural beings to transform themselves into dwarfs, giants, wizards, succubus and demons, and back to human beings. Sexual desire is one of the few constants of the novel and their metamorphoses inevitably lead to scenes of intercourse between the most unlikely characters: men who are sexually penetrated by women, *ladinos* penetrated by *indios* and human beings who penetrate animals, and vice-versa. The ultimate constant is the mulatta who meanders throughout the novel with the ardent desire of being penetrated by Celestino.

Catalina and Celestino exemplify true subjectivation—they alternate between exercising agency and being subjected to power. Following Judith Butler, “the term ‘subjectivation’ carries the paradox in itself: *assujétissement* denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection—one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency” (83). The stress on transformation and fluctuating identities is a pre-condition for being birthed anew and possessing, sexually and otherwise, the other. The deft with which Celestino and Catalina assume agency over their transformations, however, stands in contrast with the unwavering compromised position of one signature character: *la mulata*.

She makes her first appearance as a woman who lacks agency and despite her capricious attempts at subjectivation, Mulata exits the novel as the same lackluster pitiable character. She makes her first appearance in the novel as Celestino walks through the streets of his hometown looking for a young woman with whom to spend the night when his gaze falls upon her:

Los ojos negrísimos de la fulana no lo dejaron seguir adelante. Se detuvo y la miró con la insolente seguridad de rico que sabe que no hay mujer que lo resista, menos aquélla, tan planta de infeliz, vestida con un traje amarillo que era tan baba de tan viejo y usado, sobre su cuerpo de potranca, que estaría en busca de dueño.

(*Mulata* 46)

From his vantage point on horseback Celestino has set eyes on a woman whose very clothing is a sign of her dejectedness and whose enticing body is her sole bargaining chip. Her identity is fixed as *la fulana* throughout the narrative, since *mulata* remains both her racial classification and her name. Time seems to stand still while Celestino contemplates the young woman, expecting her to acquiesce to his wishes. She brandishes a fiery burning look and laughs at Celestino. Hers is a violent laugh, assures the narrator, like that of a dog brandishing its ivory teeth, stuck in livid flesh.

The details sensor any judgment the reader might have as to Celestino and at the same time, undo any possibility of affinity with Mulata. She is a racialized and impoverished other, but plagued with an inherent evil that threatens to ensnare the protagonist. The dark depths of blackness seem to be incompatible with indigenous components. According to the definition of transculturation offered by Fernando Ortiz,

the term can be used to express the different phases of the process of transitioning from one culture to another. Transculturation “does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture” and carries with it the idea of the creation of new cultural phenomena as a result of the fusion (Ortiz 102-103). Firmly encased in symbols of anti-values, whether related to indigenous cosmogonies or *mestizo* conceptions of morality and nationhood, Mulata stands for a blackness that can be penetrated but remains unknown. The metaphor lends itself to a broader claim; it is impossible to know blackness intimately.

Catalina and the other indigenous women in his hometown stand in stark contrast to Mulata, who now demands that Celestino hand over his wallet to her before he can fondle her, essentially prostituting herself: “¡La cartera antes! –le repitió, imperiosa, refregándole todo lo que en ella había de raíz flexible, de raíz que estuvo enterrada siglos debajo de un palo de ébano, y ahora vestida de carne, tan pronto era culebra como mujer” (*Mulata* 47). Mulata captivates Celestino because her avarice and sexual appetite surpass those of the chaste women he has previously encountered, and it is because *indigenas* and *mestizas* are polar opposites to the sole Mulata that this becomes part and parcel of that sexual experience. As Anabella Acevedo Leal indicates, “lo interesante aquí es que las fuerzas del mal están personificadas dentro de la novela sobre todo por una mujer, la Mulata, cuya caracterización y cuya fuerza dentro del texto parece más concreta y más definida aún que la de Cashtoc y Candanga, los dioses del mal que se disputan el poder”

(Acevedo Leal 894). Celestino ignores the signs that Mulata is in fact an enchantress, but it is crystal clear that ceding to his passion for her will guarantee him a dark fate.

The moralistic imperative that drives the battle between Cashtoc, the indigenous devil, and Candanga, the *mestizo* devil is an important driver of the novel. Cashtoc declares that the men of maize must be destroyed because they have abandoned their communal ways and have become egocentric and individualistic. Candanga doesn't see a need to destroy beings, observes Cashtoc, because his interest lies in prompting human beings into reproducing in order to populate his inferno with human flesh. At the height of the battle between Candanga and Cashtoc, a reference is made to Mandinga, a minor black devil that concretely manifests Mulata's position at the crossroads of racialized and gendered tropes in the throes of hell:

Sabido es que entre los diablos se ayudan, y a Candanga, el demonio ladino, lo ayudaba Mandinga, el demonio negro que estaba siempre de fiesta, sudoroso, con un mondadientes en la boca, o el puro, rodeado de chulísimas hembras de ébano, mimbreantes antes y después de sus deshonestidades, con no sé qué de pírrico en los ojos, y artificio de fuego fatuo en los pezones y las caderas... (*Mulata* 331)

The *indomestizo* roots of the rural landscape notwithstanding, there is a timeless struggle for dominance between the two manifestations and conceptions of evil and the balance is tilted in favor of the *ladino* influence thanks to the additional help he has received from the black devil. The mythology/fables that ground this novel echo archaic notions featuring *negros* pitted against *indigenas* in colonial color-coded spaces. Here again, it is assumed that blacks hold values that bring them into coalition with *ladino*

interests. Not only might Mandinga be assisting Candanga, but Mulata embodies the sadistic evil itself.

In a plot that interweaves such elements as sex, bodily fluids, grotesque scenes and the suffering of humans and demons alike, Mulata is the abject character *par excellence*. She is, “una mujer «cualquiera», ordinaria, vulgar. Una mujer pública, que se prostituye, sin identidad, de lo más bajo,” and sadistic to boot (Arias 966). Far from using it as background material, Mulata’s racial classification serves as a point of departure for her capriciousness and the victimization she is subjected to in the latter part of the novel.²¹ Mulata’s sexual prowess, emotional volatility and animalistic characterization only serve to reinforce the racialized representation of her demonic black body:

La mulata era terrible. A él, con ser él, se le tiraba a la cara a sacarle los ojos. Y de noche, tendida a su lado, lloraba y le mordía tan duro que no pocas veces su gran boca de fiera soberbia embadurnábase de sangre, sangre que paladeaba y se tragaba mientras se arañaba, táctil, plural, con los ojos blancos, sin pupilas, los senos llorosos de sudor. [...] Susurrándole al oído: «¡Soy tu animalito! Soy tu animalito!», o enfurecérsele y atacarlo como al peor enemigo. Cien perros, cien tigres, salían de su boca en busca del bocado que satisficiera, no su apetito, sino su rabiosa necesidad de destruir. (*Mulata* 53)

²¹ I have limited the discussion of Mulata’s dismemberment by the demons of the underworld and the theft of her sex by Catalina for the sake of brevity. Among my projects in progress is a paper that examines the indigenous myths/black fables that underpin the female body this novel. This paper is currently being considered for presentation at the 2012 Latin American Studies Association Congress.

Celestino, the poor indigenous man the reader encounters at the beginning of the novel, has attempted to dispose of Mulata by all the means available to him: poison, acid and firing at her from a close range. This is a woman who is incapable of feeling anything aside from the fire in her womb and is so wretched that she commands Catalina to pierce her arms with hatpins every night. “¡Quiero sentir!” she shrieks, beating the indigenous woman violently insisting that she is not piercing her flesh deep enough and only ceases to insist after Catalina has punctured every orifice, leaving her with “los lóbulos de las orejas sangrantes, igual que si tuviera aretes de rubíes, y los brazos y las piernas, también bañados en sangre” (*Mulata* 69).

To dismiss the centrality of the *indígena/mulata* dynamic in the novel would be to ignore how it broadens the discourse of race in Guatemala to situate blackness in the national imaginary. It is therefore useful to refer to Asturias’ own explanation for selecting the title character of this novel:

La Mulata en sí es un invento mío. La llamé Mulata para no usar la palabra Mestiza, porque no me parecía que la mezcla de sangre era suficiente en la mestiza. Evité Zamba, que habría dado una combinación de las sangres indígena india y negra, porque no creí que la palabra sugeriría la gracia de movimientos tan especial que tiene la mulata. (*Coloquio* 124)

Asturias concedes to following the common conception of the mulatta as a woman who, unlike her *mestiza* and *zamba* counterparts, is said to possess an exotic body that is sexually appealing. Not only does she appear to satisfy desires, she also remains connected to the mysterious, supernatural world. Asturias asserts that he is particularly

interested in exploring racial mixing in female characters, but makes it clear that neither *mestiza* nor *zamba* conjure the image of the *mulatta*'s unique supple movements. The intent of the novel is, as Roberto Morales astutely indicates, to break with the ideological imperative to choose one ethnic identity from the indigenous/ladino options and as a national allegory, the *indomestizo* identity is the political and spiritual object of desire (955). Yet while there are upstanding moral options in this direction, there are clear anti-values in a monstrous black identity. Mulata, who doesn't stop at being a seductress, is a vicious embodiment of blackness. She refuses to have children and refuses to have intercourse in the socially acceptable missionary position, demanding instead she always be sodomized—all of these being transgressions “agrandados de manera tal que resultan en deformaciones que convierten al personaje en una especie de monstruo” (Acevedo Leal 900).

The social construction of the black subject's sexual appetite is a feature of this novel, yet it moves away from mere tokenization to fetishizing the black body by framing it as an androgynous, hermaphrodite or transsexual—in all cases, a monstrous subject in system of values outlaid in the text. Catalina is the first to bring this to Celestino's attention, informing him that she has been spying on his new woman while she takes her baths. Catalina has observed that Mulata “no tiene sus *perfeuciones* de mujer pero tampoco tiene sus *perfeuciones* de hombre” and can attest that, “para hombre le falta tantito tantote y para mujer le sobra tantote tantito” (*Mulata* 65). Celestino confesses that Mulata has explained her refusal to face him during the sexual act because, just as the Moon is reticent to face the Sun for fear of producing monstrous children, so is she

concerned that they might do the same. *Mulata* is a racialized, sexualized, abject other—barred from reproducing. As George Yancy observes, “blackness is a congenital defect, one that burdens the body with tremendous inherited guilt. On this reading, one might say that blackness functions metaphorically as original sin. There is nothing that a black body needs *to do* in order to be found blameworthy” (5). Since the black body is sinful by nature of its existence, it is a coefficient of monstrosity when it is sexualized in a manner that does subscribe to a heteronormative model.

The paradox of identity in Central America is highlighted by Sergio Ramírez, who observes that pride in a “*mestizaje simplemente doble*” has been fixed as inoffensive adornment by hegemonic culture, while shame in the one-dimensional designations of *negro* or *indio* is recurrent since the colonial period (Ramírez 144). However, the terms “mulato” and “mulata” are beyond the localization of shame—they are inexistent and irreconcilable with conceptions of Central American identity. As Ramírez observes, even when words like *nápiro*, *picholo*, *negricillo*, *musuco*, *cerullo*, *murruco*, *trompudo* and *chajuma* denote blackness, “la palabra *mulato* está suprimida del lenguaje diario, como si su solo recuerdo fuese enojoso, y preferimos reconocernos en el “mestizo pretexto” indohispano, en el que el componente indio es menos comprometedor” (144). The very enunciation of the term, then, is a political statement, as it implies taking an empty signifier and filling it with the contents of abjectness.

Mulata de tal has been accused of being “a potboiler whose content is not sex, but anger, anger at the loss of the family, the country, and political ideals” and as René Prieto graphically states, the novel should be read allegorically (892). The novel demands a

historically grounded reading not only because Asturias turned his exile following the fall of Árbenz into an opportunity to speak out against imperialism and in favor of social change, but also because mythology is Asturias' primary means of explaining history. In novel and metaphor—indeed, as a novel metaphor in the Central American context—the title character is la *mulata*, a racial alien.

Let's remember that in Asturias' novels, the race singled out as the victim of colonization and imperialism is the indigenous population. As Susan Willis posits, "Mulata conjures up companionship in racial inferiority without being assimilated into the category of social other, which in Guatemala's racist society defines the *indio* as subhuman" (1074). Mulata represents a specific sex and a non-sex at once. Mulata's body—a working metaphor for the black diaspora—alludes to but doesn't partake in the politics of black labor or the history of indigenous exploitation. Most importantly, she is directly associated with some sort of essentialized blackness, thus she is divorced from the historical processes that craft the body into a subject/agent of history.

Demarcating Blackness and Indigeneity in Belize

As the only nation in Central America with an indigenous majority, Guatemalan local elites exploit the demographic tilt of the balance to mark their difference in Central America. As the country with the most solid of claims to the historical trajectory that aligns the Central American nations, its territorial dispute with Belize is taken as proof of the irreconcilability of the two supposedly distinct cultures. We observe here the confrontation between the essentially "coastal" imaginary of New Peoples and the self-identified Testimonial Peoples of the highlands at the border shared between Guatemala

and Belize. Couched in a language that attempts to veil a discourse heavily tinged with ideas of the colors of the rightful citizenry of each of the two nations, intellectuals speak of the incompatibility of the Creole and Mayan traditions.

Belizean author David Ruiz Puga identifies this “clash of civilizations” as the reason for Belize’s invisibility in the realm of letters. He explains, “compartimos una historia política con el Caribe, y por tener el fantasma del reclamo territorial de Guatemala, ha sido ésta suficiente razón para aislarnos de Centroamérica” (Escudos 2). The matter at hand for Belizean authors and critics writing in Spanish is to draw parallels between their “differential” Central American context and those imagined as rightfully belonging to the historical processes that have given rise to the identities of the isthmus. For Belize to claim a place in the Central American tradition, it must hinge its cultural narrative on a Spanish speaking indigenous minority along the border and not on its Anglophone black population.

While the interest of this chapter is not the veracity of numbers, it is of primary interest to my analysis to examine the rhetorical turns employed by *mestizo* authors writing about the least porous Central American border to negotiate their country’s difference. In this context, Ruiz Puga’s statement that sixty percent of the population in Belize considers itself *mestizo* and the majority of the population speaks Creole, the *lingua franca*, is of particular interest. Only a minority speaks English, the official language, he states “por lo tanto, lo poco que se ha escrito ha sido en inglés, y esto ha sido por una élite de escritores criollos (ascendencia africana y anglo)” (Escudos 2). It becomes of primary importance to see *mestizos* and *indígenas* in Belize according to

parameters established by Central American national imaginaries. Blackness along with Creole English is aligned with the Anglophone Caribbean literary and intellectual traditions. Taking the boundaries established by warring empires results in the assumption that the right to be admitted into the isthmus' intellectual tradition rests on association with indigenous communities and to a lesser extent, the rural populations that encompass both *mestizo* and *indígena* groups.

In Puga's novel *Got seif de Cuin!* (1995), the status of the Maya in Belize is tangible in the *mestizo* imagination due to the fact that the population's alienation from black subjects that have conformed to British rule are represented a world away. That they struggle to comprehend the implications of colonial rule and the expectation that they join the independence movement, allows them to be classified as witness peoples incorporated unwillingly into the notions of nation-statehood that subject them. This is the consciousness of the borderlands:

The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The [borderlands subject's] dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness. In a constant state of nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn between two ways, [the borderlands subject] is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the [borderlands subject] faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does [s/he] listen to? (Anzaldúa 100)

Like the shape-changing indigenous couple in Asturias' *Mulata de tal*, the indigenous subjects in *Got seif de Cuin!* discover that they need not hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries, that rigidity means death. Survival for the borderlands subject, we are reminded by Gloria Anzaldúa, depends on developing tolerance for contradictions and ambiguity (101). Only by remaining flexible can they survive living in the borderlands.

Got seif de Cuin! is set in a relatively isolated town in the Tipu Region on the edge of the Río Viejo, a location that indicates that the intended reader of the novel is a Spanish-speaking *mestizo* who knows the river by this name. Naming is political: Anglophone Belizean readers know it as the Belize River. It is navigable up to the Guatemalan border and has served as the main artery of commerce and communication between the interior and the coast well into the twentieth century, all facts that highlight its importance. The river charts its course along the northern edge of the Maya Mountains across the center of the country to the sea just north of Belize City, passing through a number of Mayan archaeological sites. These qualities make Río Viejo/Belize River a site of contestation as perceived by the British empire and later, the Belizean government, as well as the Spanish empire and later, the Guatemalan government. History and literary narrative focus on the destiny of the Mayan communities whose self-determination lay on the hinges of the will of these governments. Their allegiance has been of pivotal importance to both factions.

The first stranger to arrive in this Mayan community represents Queen Victoria, Sovereign and Empress of India and bears her message. He was, “un cura de ojos azules y nariz respingada, quien dijo venía a establecer una escuela para enseñarle a todos el

idioma en que Su Majestad deseaba que sus súbditos se comunicaran” (*Got seif* 9). Her reign of over sixty-three years resulted in the hitherto unmatched expansion of the British Empire that brought this area into the fold. Believing that British Honduras’ designation as a “settlement” hindered its economic growth, settlers began to ask for colonial status in the mid nineteenth century. Responding to a suggestion by British officials, Belize adopted a chartered political constitution similar to that of the British Caribbean colonies; in 1854 and in 1861 the Legislative Assembly sent a petition to Queen Victoria asking that the area be formally integrated into the empire (Camille 55). The British Crown acceded to the settler’s request the following year and declared “British Honduras” to be its colony. The census carried out shortly before its incorporation revealed that the population of Belize, which had numbered only a few thousand in the early 1800s, increased to 25,635 in 1861 and that this demographic shift was mainly due to Maya and *mestizo* immigration from Yucatán. These two populations were important to the British Crown because they settled close to areas that were dominated by mahogany extraction.

According to the novel, their location, which prior to the dispute between Guatemala and Great Britain allowed for a high degree of autonomy, results in a lack of integration into a national imaginary and incomprehensibility as to what it means to be a subordinate of any Crown. “He oído a monjas alemanas tratando de enseñar a niños mayas de un libro escrito en inglés que tenían que explicar en español...” wrote a Governor who visited the colony and observed children speaking “Ispamal”—a mix of English, Spanish, Yucatec Mayan and German (*Got seif* 10). The narrative leads the reader to a political position with respect to ethnolinguistic heritage: the imposition of

language and chain of command was so abrupt that the elders of the community went from their own cosmogony to that which was represented by the framed image of a white woman that hung in public establishments. Being so removed from the ideology they were said to be absorbing, the phrase “Got seif the Cuin!” was repeated by indigenous subjects who were uncertain about how they had become part of India and England.

Their late elder had been “el único sobreviviente de los sobrevivientes de la mística ciudad del Tipú, perdida en el tiempo, donde crecían mazorcas con granos de oro y dónde Chaac bajaba a regar las siembras con gotas cristalinas de jade imperial” (*Got seif* 12). The marimba once called Ecos Españoles becomes La Británica overnight and a new elder—Don Enrique—proclaims, “Ni mo’os... la ley lo exige... Got seif de Cuin!” (*Got seif* 14). The transfer of power brings with it the rumor that the woman in the picture, the Empress herself, will arrive to meet her new subjects. The town’s excitement over the pomp and circumstance wanes as the people realize that she will not appear and that someone has been sent in her place. Having been sent white representatives until then, they stare in amazement at the black man that approaches them:

Muy de repente alzó la cara y vio a las pocas personas a su lado petrificadas, con la quijada colgando, viendo hacia arriba. Don Enrique volteó los ojos y se encontró cara a cara con un gigantesco caballo, sobre el cual estaba un hombre, negro como el carbón e inmenso como las chatonas que bailaban en las fiestas de la Virgen. [...] Dio dos pasos atrás y dándole una mirada cortés al negro de guantes blancos, se inclinó y dijo: “¡Viva África!” (*Got seif* 16)

Though Don Enrique has accepted British law, he has accepted the fluidity of power and the facility of its transmission from seat of power to another. The text captures the irony in Don Enrique's reaction; he has come to believe himself subject to the authority of any foreign power that comes to town, he sees a black man and believes himself now an African subject. The age-old simile well established in literature that focuses on the black subject's skin enters the indigenous man's ken: black like coal. The conventional habit of referring to color and size cedes as the text leads the reader to the element that makes this a quintessential Belizean text about blackness. The black man wears white gloves; he is a gentleman who has arrived in this village to enforce the Crown's will.

This factor of "belonging" to the colonial order counterposes the will of the indigenous community against that of white *and* black officials—who jointly sustain allegiance to the royal order. The black official, Cabo Saxo, ushers a cavalry of twenty black officials wearing similar white uniforms with gold polished buttons. The narrative establishes a ranking order between these black men, "de hombros anchos y cara de perro rastreador" and the indigenous "duendes que rondaban los callejones del pueblo," highlighting perceived differences in their stature and the dignified postures assumed through a direct connection to the seat of power (*Got seif* 20). The most blatant change signaled by their arrival is the replacement of Queen Victoria's picture with that of King Edward. Of course, there is also a new salute: God Save the King!

An English monarch in Central America, amidst a Mayan community with a rightful claim to the lands, memories and cultures of Mesoamerica? The presumptuousness of the colonialists that arrive with a photograph and command the

salute is almost blasphemous. The community cedes to the command just as the indigenous peoples have been required to do since the Spanish arrived bearing *requerimientos*. The novel intends to present us with a testimonial response of the indigenous peoples, who have been denied coevalness to the Spaniards and their *mestizo/ladino* descendants, and now to the Anglo-Saxon and Afro-Caribbean subjects who arrive bearing the sovereign's commands.

The novel presents the disadvantages of a marginalized community in the transition from one colonial rule to another highlighting the ethnic complexities of post-independence Belizean society. The retrospective look at the consequences of colonialism and statehood on a Mayan community reflects a consideration of the multicultural reality of the country in contemporary Belizean letters. As the author explains, “mientras que el texto antes de la independencia tenía como interés el desarrollo de la conciencia política para la independencia política, el texto después de la independencia se orienta más a la política cultural de la nueva sociedad multiétnica” (“Panorama” 3). The linguistic, political and cultural challenges faced by the Maya in this context are paralleled to those they have endured since the arrival of the Spanish in the isthmus.

Among the changes that profoundly affect the community upon King Edward's ascension to the throne and the ensuing battle between the Guatemalan government with the Crown is the cessation of free transit between Fayabón in Guatemala and Río Viejo in British Honduras. Travel is prohibited under penalty of imprisonment and entire families are affected by this measure. The enforcement of the law is guaranteed by the tone used

by the black official “con cuerpo de toro y ojos de carnero” who responds to Don Enrique’s polite request with, “Dis da di Polees Stayshan... if Ah ketch enybady di go da Fayabon true riva, Ah wahn haffu lak ahn op!” (*Got seif!* 21). Though his Creole English and the color of skin would never grant him entry into the King’s chambers, his uniform marks him as representative and enforcer of British Empire’s order. In the established hierarchy, the Caribbean blacks who were issued to Belize in order to quell the incipient independence movement are subaltern subjects of intermediate rank whose central role, at least in this novel, is to subject and control the indigenous population.

In her emblematic essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” Gayatri Spivak suggests that the problem of granting a voice to the subaltern masses is twofold: it assumes cultural solidarity among heterogeneous peoples and depends on the intellectual to speak for/about the subaltern. The agent of *Got seif de Cuin* is the indigenous subject whose epistemic difference is marked as a clear departure from the black subject who readily submits to the command of his sovereign ruler. The novel posits that by reclaiming a collective cultural identity, the Maya subject and her/his community re-inscribe their position in society and reclaim agency. They leave in their place the black subaltern subject, whose dejection is that he himself cannot speak, be heard or be spoken for. They can only mimic the words of a ruler a world away; they are left with the task of fashioning a world in the image of Europe in the midst of the tropics. Black creoles submit to mimicry while indigenous subjects retain the keen intellectual faculties of their Mesoamerican ancestors.

As Jeff Browitt notes, “a medida que el pueblo va entrando en la modernidad, se forma una diferencia de perspectivas entre los pueblerinos y los políticos ingleses e incluso los nacionales,” principally to the indigenous peoples being unaccustomed to European legal practices, written contracts and the concept of private property (5). Gone is the attention to the white/indigenous dividing line in the Central American imaginary and in place is a more complex *negro/indígena* fracture that speaks to a need to maintain indigenous spaces untainted. The ideal space for indigenous communities, the text emphasizes, is one that grants them full autonomy. They are caught in the borderlands, where black men are first agents of the Crown to become later representatives of an independence movement that does not have the best interests of indigenous peoples in their plan of action.

Cruz, a young man from the village who has returned from fighting alongside the British in World War II, seethes in anger at the memory of being subjected to discrimination in the trenches and implores his community to join Fayabón and become part of Guatemala. His plan is thwarted by three men: two black, one mulatto. In broken Spanish, they propose an entirely different plan. Independence, the lead orator claims, will bring about a peaceful revolution for the entire community. They will all become “comrades” and together they will embody the concepts of a popular movement, liberation, progress and the rights of all citizens. He declares that Belize belongs to blacks and indigenous peoples, not King George or the Governor, and self-government will entail a peaceful life with brethren in Fayabón and other Central American nations. The problem, he declares, lies in colonialism, and whereas they have been likewise exploited

in Río Hondo, Guatemala, the Independence movement promises to “quitar los faroles y traerles luz eléctrica, crear mejores fuentes de trabajo para los obreros, una vida mejor para su familia... educación para sus hijos” (Ruiz Puga 35). While these promises allude to liberal rhetoric and notions of progress, they also bear the stamp of a guarantee of racial equality—made manifest in the newly unveiled flag of the envisioned republic.

The solution to colonialism, according to the mulatto speaker is for the Maya to become Belizean. They must see themselves as citizens of this nation that can be forged if the *negro/indígena* dividing line is erased. The silence amongst the townspeople is palpable, undermining the passionate speeches issued by the men who come bearing the flag of the newly imagined nation:

Un susurro de estupor brotó de la asistencia al ver el pabellón de dos yardas de largo con un colorido escudo al centro. [...]

“Aquí están los trabajadores...” explicó apuntando a las figuras de los dos hombres, uno de piel negra cargando un hacha sobre un hombro y otro de tez clara cargando un canaleta, “...las razas de este pueblo viviendo y trabajando juntos para construir el nuevo país de las Américas...” (*Got seif* 36)

The flag is meant to represent the people’s past and their future, providing them with an ideal image upon which a new national imaginary would be founded on. The flag, however, loses its meaning as soon as the orators leave and they are once again faced with the reality of the black policemen who establish a curfew and penalties for any individuals associated with the movement and accused of treason against the Crown. Meanwhile the president of Guatemala likewise campaigns to bring the Maya community

into the fold, and magnifies the *negro/indígena* dividing line in order to exploit it as the main threat to the Maya community's cultural survival.

What "belonging" to Belize means to the indigenous peoples of Rio Viejo is best summarized by Don Justo, the first elder who arrives at Don Enrique's deathbed to bring him solace. Scoffing at politicians, declaring that they would be the same men, dressed differently and with bigger pockets: "Qué es eso que los indios por un lado y los negros por acá y los más negros más allá... el fuerte se da el lujo de hablar de la pobreza y la justicia, y no nos damos cuenta de nuestra triste realidad" (Ruiz Puga 76). The semantics of the phrase indicate that the Maya will now be subjected to the will of black subjects and that racial divisions will continue to be in place. Indigenous communities will continue to be relegated to the margins while the "negros por acá" will assume center-stage. The advantage afforded by hindsight, looking back at the Tipu region on the edge of the Río Viejo/Belize River on the eve of Belizean Independence from the perspective of present-day border disputes, conveys the aptness of Don Justo's words to the reader.

The novel, then, reaches its end with the assertion that neither the black leaders of the Independence Movement, nor the *mestizo* Guatemalan officials, nor the white British and their black policemen cared about the *indígena* groups in this disputed territory. Their concerns were solely geopolitical gains in the struggle to maintain control over the territory and its people. Being included in the new nation only means, for the Maya, further exclusion from the center of politics and the notion of citizenry. That the tables have been reversed and that *negros* have achieved power, represents another loss for the

indigenous peoples who are now subject to the new black republic's laws and territorial boundaries.

Who Will Have the Last Word on Blackness?

Luis Cardoza y Aragón is recognized as one of the foremost Central American essayists. In “Un guacamayo en el polo” (1955), he states that despite the beauty and the color of the indigenous peoples, a deep silence pervades the countryside. Be it a *criollo*, *mestizo* or *indígena*, the Guatemalan subject has been beaten and silenced and impeded from flourishing into the eternal spring it could have been. Its Mayan communities have been repeatedly besieged and caught in a boundary dispute that has yet to be resolved. Speaking on behalf of the people of Belize, a government pamphlet published shortly after independence declares that Belize has been unable to exercise its “inalienable right to independence solely because of the threats of the neighboring country of Guatemala” (n.p.). This indo-*mestizo* country maintains an anachronistic claim to the territory of Belize, despite its admission to never having occupied or administered the region. The communities that inhabit the disputed territories are Maya. In literary and political rhetoric alike, “*indigenismo* responds to the determinants of a society characterized by underdevelopment and dependency of its capitalist structure, while the referent—the indigenous world—appears conditioned by a rural structure still stained with feudal residues” (Cornejo Polar 112). *Indigenismo* is central to a Central American imaginary, which isolates Belize for being an essentially black nation. Specifically, the Maya are as central to conceptions of Guatemalan experience as Creole blacks are the articulation of Belizean identity.

Black subjects are a disenfranchised group outside of Belize. This is due to the assumption that, as representative of a possible New People social formation, they fared better in the colonial period through their complicity with Spaniards to subjugate the indigenous. This is a belief that has been transposed to literary production and is evident in such statements as: “By comparison to the brutalized indigenous population, black slaves were a privileged and expensive form of labor. They did not toil in the mines or the *latifundia*, but served as house slaves, craftsmen and teamsters. By reason of their history, modern Guatemalan blacks are seen as spirited and independent by nature” (Willis 1074). As the perceived beneficiaries of British and North Americans colonial histories, blacks are the *de jure* citizens and *de facto* foreigners across Central America. In Belize, they enjoy the privileges of absolute citizenry.

Despite the importance of *indigenismo* and contemporary expressions of indigeneity as a commodity whose wholesale circulation is made possible by contemporary tourism, indigenous peoples are excluded from government and positions of leadership in Guatemala. In contrast, the Belizean national imaginary displays an elite that consists of black and *mestizo* subjects. The Belizean Ministry of Tourism boasts, “even though the Creole, the descendants of African slaves and European settlers of the Colonial era, constitute only one-third of Belize’s population today, they may be considered to be the most ‘culturally influential group’ in Belize.” It further specifies two distinct groups of *mestizos*: those who fled the Yucatan peninsula settled in Belize in the 1800s and those who fled the Guatemalan civil wars in the 1980s. It is conceived as nation of New Peoples. Belize declares itself to be a melting pot of more than ten distinct

cultures and highlights, as Guatemala does, an ancient Mayan past. Although Indian, Chinese, Palestinian and German migrations have significantly altered the socio-cultural dynamics of both nations—the Mayan historical claim to the isthmus remains the proverbial “elephant in the room” that arrests attention in both countries. At the basis of the territorial dispute is the matter of preserving the Mesoamerican imaginary intact by keeping Testimonial Peoples shielded from the processes that threaten to turn them into a New Peoples. It is an opposition that has become increasingly challenged as Central American national and regional imaginaries are fashioned anew by the forces of globalization.

CHAPTER 5 Novel Reconciliations

The smell of rondón stew, the sounds of calypso music, the sights of lavish costumes in parades and beauty contests were vital to the preparations involved in planning Costa Rica's 30th Black Heritage Festival in 2010, which bore the theme "Back to the Roots." The events are held throughout the month of August and typically culminate in Port Limón with a Gala Parade and the "Fraternal Gathering Celebration" at the *Black Star Line* building. Built in 1922 to serve as headquarters for the Port Limón chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and declared national patrimony in 2000, choosing this building as the locus for the final ceremony commemorates the Afro-Costa Rican population's struggle to be recognized as an entitled constituency in a country that has long projected a *white* self-image.

These festivities were the development of an initiative to establish August 31st as the "Día Nacional de la Persona Negra y la Cultura Afrocostarricense" in the school calendar that was headed by the Teacher's Union in 1980 and affirmed by Decree N° 11938, signed by then President Rodrigo Carazo (Vargas Porras 2011). After three decades of annual festivities, the Legislative Assembly voted on March 28, 2011 to make this date an official national holiday. Speaking on behalf of her Limón constituents, who have turned the event into a highly anticipated and well-organized event attracting tourists from Central America and the Caribbean, Deputy Elibeth Venegas stated that

Afro-Costa Rican culture:

Ha tenido un impacto positivo en nuestro quehacer diario, porque hemos heredado su música, su comida, su ritmo y su alegría. [...] No hemos dejado de aprender de sus grandes valores y de destacados aportes en distintos ámbitos de la vida nacional. [...] Esta iniciativa, va a permitir que el valor de la festividad se traslade a todos los centros educativos y sociedad en general, impulsando así el valor de la contribución de esta hermosa cultura. (qtd. in Vado 2011)

While these words are specifically relevant to the newly implemented law, they also confirm that the locus of enunciation for diversity and inclusion has shifted from popular sectors to the government. Moreover, forces external to the nation-state have tinged political rhetoric in the thirty years between the clamor for an initiative and the enactment of a law that validates black experience in Costa Rica. I am referring here to the discourses of human rights ushered in by United Nations involvement in the peace processes of neighboring countries, the increasing NGOization that raised the status of women's groups and ethnic coalitions and a general call for governmental accountability to marginalized communities. In short, these past three decades mark the advent of a conception of pluralistic Central American societies that appeals to both governments and civil society.

I close this project with a consideration of how these discussions of ethnicity and citizenship that are clearly visible in Costa Rican politics have been transposed to literature. I hold that *Calypso* (1996), by Tatiana Lobo, and *Limón Blues* (2002), by Anacristina Rossi appear in this context as remarkably similar projects of national

reconciliation that demand accountability for the historical neglect of the black communities of the Costa Rican Atlantic Coast. In the first section, I examine how these works destabilize the idealized subject of the Costa Rican national imaginary. In the second and third sections, I examine the socio-economic specificities of the sites depicted in both novels. In the fourth section, I examine the connection between eco-feminism and cultural pluralism in both texts. My aim in this final chapter is to highlight how a liminal citizenry becomes a bargaining chip in the era of globalization.

Black in the Tropics

The term “*tropics*” highlights a vast and largely mystified place between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn that is generally envisioned as a paradisiacal getaway. How different from the urban and rural contexts to which it is quickly contrasted in the mind’s eye! The term “*black*” presents us with a plethora of rhetorical possibilities from which to consider the subject matter of this chapter. Indeed, I refer here to a black subjectivity constructed as part and parcel of the aforementioned geocultural area. Yet I am also concerned with silencing the “*l*” in the word and refashioning the phrase to state “*back in the tropics*” because I am also concerned with the possibility of considering how this adverb connotes distance, moving both reader and critic at a distance away from a fixed point. Lastly, I am interested in silencing the “*b*” in order for the phrase to read “*lack in the tropics*” because the noun refers to the state of being without or being deficient in something. There is a question in the folds of the title that I would like to work with in this chapter: what does the black subject lack back in the tropics? Though the question may appear superfluous, it is a necessary stepping-stone in

the process of explaining why the Costa Rican women authors whose novels I examine in this chapter assume the task of national reconciliation.

Set in Parima Bay Tatiana Lobo's *Calypso* (1996) tracks the destinies of three women—Amanda, Eudora, Matilda—and their female relatives, all of whom successfully claim their independence as women throughout the 20th century. It features a white character, Lorenzo, who leaves the economically depressed Central Valley with the intent of making a fortune on the coast. Since it covers three generations of women, the novel is also able to track the socio-economic changes that transform this coastal town from the isolated hamlet of 1941 to the tourist's paradise of today. In the span of time that covers the lives of the principal female characters, roads are built leading to the town, villagers introduce eggs in their diet and acquire radios, electricity and running water—all which were available to Costa Ricans in the interior of the country long before they were introduced to the coast. In the last pages of the novel, Parima Bay disappears when a tsunami ravages the town.

Anacristina Rossi's *Limón Blues* (2002) is set in Costa Rica's Limón Province in 1904. It is a rich text that details how a chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association was founded in Limón, Costa Rica. The central characters of the novel are a black couple, Orlandus and Irene, who meet at the height of Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement and raise their three children in Limón. Both individuals value their long-term extramarital affairs: Orlandus with a white woman named Leonor and Irene with a white man named Ariel. When Irene is left widowed, the lack of opportunities for her children in the coastal community leads to her decision to migrate to the Central

Valley. The novel chronicles the rise of a generation of West Indian immigrants who defied Costa Rican and North American racism by establishing their own mutual help societies and cultural programs, but were ultimately crippled by the continuous blows to the local economies.

These novels share multiple points of contact, not the least of which are the representations of black bodies and sexuality that are evident at first blush, but I will focus here on rhetorical strategies more intimately related to national processes. *Calypso* and *Limón Blues* purport to bridge the multiple oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality in order to transition from a static multicultural approach to a strategic national “reconciliatory” literary venture. They strategically deploy a feminist rhetoric in order to challenge the privileged masculine subject of the Costa Rican national imaginary. Not only do these texts privilege women’s experience, they also attempt to bridge the gap between *History* and *history* by focusing on the West Indian presence in the country. But before examining the novels, a closer look at Costa Rican peculiar circumstances in the region is in order.

Costa Rica has been heralded the “Switzerland of Central America.” This is one of the many cultural myths that are diffused and repeated to defend a set of cultural values and authenticate Costa Rican differential status in the isthmus, as Dorothy Mosby affirms. Though the myths may be difficult to ground, this Central American republic is known for: “its natural beauty, the mystical qualities of its coffee, the abolition of its armed forces, and its demographic stability in a region of political violence” (Mosby 23). As the most “exported” of its legends, “whiteness” has its foundation in the patterns of

colonial rule and neocolonial ventures in investment capitalism. As early as 1844, travelers to Costa Rica corroborated the myth of whiteness that had begun to define the country. The Scottish traveler Glasgow Dunlop declared, “los habitantes del Estado de Costa Rica son casi todos blancos, no habiéndose mezclado con los indios como en otras partes de la América española, y los pocos de color han venido sin duda de los Estados vecinos” (84). Ever aware that Costa Rica’s position hinged on a national imaginary predicated on ethnic homogeneity, intellectuals and politicians alike reacted publicly to the growing presence of Caribbean immigrants recruited to work for the United Fruit Company by adhering to eugenicist rhetoric. An anonymous petition to the Costa Rican Congress dated 1932 reads:

I believe it is a principle of true nationalism that the companies that come to extract the juice from our land should be imposed on to respect and even adopt our language. The congress should begin to pay attention to this Jamaican race that is not only the owners of the Atlantic region but is also invading the interior of the country without anyone concerning ourselves with the fact, and when they do pay attention to it, it will be too late. Blacks, Chinese, Polacks [Eastern European Jews], Coolies [South Asians], and all manner of undesirable scum who get thrown out of other countries or are kept out enter and exit our borders like it’s nothing without the authorities showing any interest, and this has worsened the agonizing situation of workers like us. (qtd. in Palmer and Molina 245-246)

The author of the letter identifies himself as a citizen who is outraged that the United Fruit Company is instructing blacks in methods of naturalizing themselves in order “to

present the whole bunch of darkies [*toda la negrada*] they have as Costa Ricans” (qtd. in Palmer and Molina 245).

This discourse did not fall on deaf ears. The black diaspora responded by establishing a chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association on Costa Rican soil, promoting economic self-sufficiency and developing a literary/artistic tradition that promoted the notion of a unified black world. As Santiago Valencia Chalá observes, more than in any other Central American country, West Indians in Costa Rica were politically mobilized since their arrival, establishing cooperatives and political organizations that still exist today. Like their counterparts elsewhere in Central America, they were intensely proud of the Anglo-Saxon British culture, sent their children to small private schools usually connected with a church where they learned British history, geography and civics, computed in pounds, shillings and pence and ignored the fact that they were living in Central America (Biesanz 777). External symbols of cultural difference—such as the headscarves, flounced skirts, straw hats and gloves that women wore on Sundays as well as the gaudy regalia worn by men in lodge processions—served to manifest their defiance of acculturation and *mestizo-white* Costa Rican national standards. This is the starting point for Anacristina Rossi’s *Limón Blues*.

Meanwhile, the point of departure for Tatiana Lobo’s *Calypso* is found in the very title of the narrative and is explained in its epigraph: *Calypso: ritmo caribeño que narra una historia. Se origina en los informativos clandestinos que los esclavos solían cantar y bailar, para comunicarse las noticias del día y las maldades del amo*. The novel situates the reader away from the organized, British-inspired world of Port Limón—first

established in 1502 on Columbus' fourth voyage—which holds a special place in the Costa Rican diaspora's cultural imagination. In the fishing village of this novel, the constants of oral tradition and modes of resistance employed since the period of slavery are still relevant. As Dorothy Mosby explains, there are two traditions of oral transmission that lay the groundwork for storytellers of West Indian descent to put their stories into writing: the West African Ashanti tales of a trickster spider named Anancy and the calypsos, which are structured rhythmically to be remembered and repeated (32-33). The aim of both *Calypso* and *Limón Blues*, then, is to take these quintessentially black ways of being, seeing and knowing to show the cracks and devices in the hegemonic Costa Rican national imaginary from which blacks are excluded. Interventions like those of Tatiana Lobo and Anacristina Rossi represent a radical departure from constructions of the national subject—white, male, middle-class—and his national history. Indeed, they seem to respond to a long-standing question posed by Quince Duncan, the most prolific Afro-Central American novelist, and the historian Carlos Meléndez in the prologue to their groundbreaking essay, “El negro en Costa Rica:”

¿Existe una política definida que tienda a disminuir las distancias socioculturales entre el negro y el resto de los costarricenses? Diríamos que no. Esto no es conveniente, de manera que en un futuro, lo más próximo posible ojalá, habrá necesidad de tomar medidas más efectivas para contribuir a demoler las barreras interétnicas que nos separan de estos otros costarricenses nuevos, que tienen tanto

derecho como nosotros a gozar de los beneficios de la ciudadanía. (Meléndez and Duncan 9)

According to these thinkers, the racial problem in Costa Rica is not the existence of the black population *per se*, but the failure to acknowledge the reality of institutional racism and ethnic tension in interpersonal relationships. Worldwide acceptance of multiculturalism and cultural difference in its many variants puts institutional racism under a microscope. With its policy of political correctness, the present political moment ushers in the rhetoric that makes it possible to flirt with the “other.”

As Abril Trigo indicates, multiculturalism has been co-opted by government institutions and is applied equally by liberals and conservatives in the “culture wars” fought from left to right. Its essential problem is that “en su afán por defender y preservar las culturas termina banalizando lo cultural, termina ofreciendo una visión simplista del mundo actual, incapaz de comprender la indisoluble imbricación de la economía y la cultura” (Trigo 18). The novels I examine here are fraught with essentialisms that lock them in an intimate dance with the “liberal mystification” of multiculturalism identified by Trigo. The call for multiculturalism in the world of the text is intimately tied with the initiatives known as *proyectos de rescate cultural* that have been promoted by the Ministries of Culture and the Ministries of Tourism across Central America since the improperly termed post-war (1979-Present) period.

Black Times, Black Places and the Multicultural Nation

The Central American revolutionary movements of the 1970s and 80s led to a cultural boom in the isthmus that has most often been associated with testimonial

literature and revolutionary poetry. Gioconda Belli and Rigoberta Menchú—to name just two of the many emblematic women writers of this period—reflected on gender and their commitments to social change in the context of raging civil wars. Frauke Geweke observes that Central American women’s narratives of the 1980s reflect a radical critique of society and in the aesthetic and epistemological concepts that were incorporated into the experimental structures of their texts. These Central American writers challenged mainstream paradigms in women’s writing by bringing forth “others” into literary discourse rather than emphasizing a personal, intimate world bound to romantic affinities. As precarious and often perilous alliances were forged across generations, social classes and indigenous groups, women’s literature positioned itself as literature of the oppressed, where the experiences of the “other”—understood as non-hegemonic or subaltern—had a rightful place.

As Laura Barbas-Rhoden observes, these women’s narratives shed light on “the politics behind divisions such as elite/popular and literature/orality, and they bring into focus gendered dichotomies like public/private, passive/active, desired/desiring, which have been inscribed in the story of the past” (3). As political statements, *Calypso* and *Limón Blues* share many of the interests of women’s narratives from the 1980s. The novels examined here are solid critiques of *History* and its role in the subjugation of women and black communities. In the Afterword to *Limón Blues*, Anacristina Rossi states her desire to reveal to the reader “un mundo que, por la barrera del idioma y la incomprensión y el racismo costarricense, quedó fuera del acervo cultural del país” (Rossi 418). Meanwhile, Tatiana Lobo asserts in a 2002 interview that her intent was to,

“dejar testimonio de cómo la cultura dominante está destruyendo la cultura de los pueblos del Caribe costarricense. [...] Con su desaparición el país está perdiendo la maravillosa posibilidad de diversificar la cultura de su territorio y esto nos empobrece a todos” (Brenes Molina 4).

Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the themes of “mainstream” Central American writers, their novels are the result of the disillusionment that follows the end of utopian revolutionary movements. These fictions run the tropes of pain and pleasure, sadism and murder that bear little resemblance to the revolutionary narratives produced just two decades ago. As Beatriz Cortez asserts, “la ficción contemporánea sugiere que no es la moralidad sino la pasión la que mueve al individuo más allá de la razón o de su consideración de los valores de cualquier tipo” (Cortez 2). Cynicism is the aesthetic imperative of these narratives: “el cinismo, como una forma estética, provee al sujeto una guía para sobrevivir en un contexto social minado por el legado de la violencia de la guerra y por la pérdida de una forma concreta de liderazgo” (Cortez 27). These narratives feature subjects without a claim to the social constructions of gender. They have a passion for defining the standards of decency, morality and other principles fundamental to the symbolic order—and procede to destroy them. Like the post-dictatorship narratives of the Southern Cone, these show the symptoms of what is absent in post-war Central American culture. The list includes, though it is not limited to, “la experiencia de la alegría, la lucha por defender el cuerpo que tiene de actuar, el predominio de la vida por sobre la muerte, la immanencia del poder” (Cortez 38). The fact that *Calypso* and *Limón Blues* grant the “nation” and “multiculturalism” center stage

reflects an intentional departure from overarching discourses of cynicism that are seemingly confirmed in this strain of mainstream fiction.

The novels I explore carry the intended reader over the large, fertile Central Plateau—a tectonic depression over which the most important cities in the country have been raised. Costa Rica attracted less European immigration after independence than it had hoped but, starting with the building of the railroad to the Caribbean coast in the 1870s, hundreds of Chinese and thousands of Afro-Antillean laborers entered the country (Palmer and Molina 229). Since then, these groups have lived outside the Central Valley, where the majority of the Costa Rican population—the national electorate—lives (Palmer and Molina 230). Demographic and political imbalance, accentuated by ethnic difference, meant that the Central Valley also received a disproportionate number of public spending during the twentieth century. Writing outside of the Central Valley, considered the cradle of the improperly termed “Costa Rican culture,” is a political maneuver.

The Parima Bay of *Calypso* and the Limón of *Limón Blues* are not paradisiacal Caribbean settings. Beyond sharing tropical climates, these locations give rise to parallel conditions that are represented as the basis of black woman’s identity in the novels we focus on in this essay. Both communities are located in remote locations away from San José and are thus politically marginal and economically autarchic, seldom coming into contact with white Costa Ricans. Male and female, the black characters rely on cultural memory—one that has taught them to fear all representations of power and to avoid encounter, since terror for the black subject is fossilized in the master-subject relationship established in the slave period (hooks 175). Though Costa Ricans have been socialized to

believe that blacks associate positive feelings with words that connote “white,” these novels highlight the threat and terror that the black subject feels when it comes in contact with whiteness and the historical hurt it represents.

As Maurice Halbwachs reminds us, collective memory is socially constructed: “While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember” (22). *Calypso* and *Limón Blues* oblige the reader to look to black times and black places in order to deconstruct and reassemble his/her memory of the Costa Rican nation. These texts fulfill the goal of reconciliation, which is understood here in the same terms established by contemporary international organizations: reconciliation is a “process through which a society moves from a divided past into a shared future” (Bloomfield et al. 12). The heated debates about ethnicity and citizenship throughout the twentieth century gave the black diaspora a place in the national imaginary... the Caribbean. To bring the black diaspora into the Costa Rican fold, contemporary narratives attending to the need for reconciliation scavenge the Atlantic Coast to symbolically rescue black *histories* from oblivion with the goal of integrating them into the hegemonic national imaginary.

Calypso

Calypso reveals postcolonial silences and their implications for the present and future, a project that involves “revealing colonial conspiracies and dismantling their ‘regime of truth’ in fictional discourse” (Barbas-Rhoden 128). The opening pages manifest an interest in catching the intended reader’s attention by focusing on a white man, Lorenzo Parima, who leaves the Central Valley fleeing economic crisis and looking

forward to a promising life of plenitude. Like the intended reader who joins him on his voyage, “se encontraba a punto de iniciar la aventura más trascendental de su existencia, la que modificaría el curso de su destino” (Lobo 11). Thus Lorenzo and this intended reader embark upon a journey financed by a black man who they can trust to lead them safely to their destination, a rich green jungle and a solitary beach on the coast. Plantináh is the perfect guide, since he is “el único negro que no guardaba resentimiento contra los blancos, el único negro que se relacionaba con todos por igual sin discriminar religión, ni aspecto ni color, en parte porque no era súbdito británico y [...] también porque disfrutó de una infancia feliz y no había conocido insultos ni humillaciones” (Lobo 12). This is not the black man from Limón who bears the scars of discrimination and the airs of black Britishers; this is a black insider who is delighted to share his paradise with any Costa Rican of any creed and color.

Deborah Singer finds that the experience of travel in Tatiana Lobo’s novels gives headway to a dynamic conception of space that involves the subject that is inserted into it. This is because, “el traslado espacial en dirección al Caribe trae consigo un movimiento hacia dentro de sí mismo en que el sujeto se hace consciente del espacio interno, y en ese proceso se conjuga lo ya conocido con los elementos ajenos, de manera que hay una actualización de las ‘reservas’ de conocimiento” (Singer 4). Journeying to the black Caribbean Coast within the national boundaries of Costa Rica necessarily involves introspection and acquiring the experience necessary to reconfigure existing perceptions about the land and its people. In this context, the women of the community become important agents of transmitting the past and future of this community. The

reader first becomes acquainted with Amanda Scarlet, the point of origin for the matrilineal line in the same moment that Lorenzo is captivated with lust for her body:

Obra perfecta de la naturaleza, todas las artes del África negra se habían puesto de acuerdo en definitivo consenso: Amanda Scarlet era una estatuilla de Dogón, una pieza de madera de Yoruba, una escultura de Bambara, un marfil de Nigeria, estilizada tinaja de Manbetu, talla de Baulé, bronce de Benin, barro de Dahome. Nada había dejado al azar a su hechura. Todas las materias primas, las vegetales, las minerales, se habían utilizado en trabajo colectivo de exigentes artesanos, enamorados de su obra al punto de no querer abandonarla. (Lobo 25)

A schema is put in place regarding the black woman's body as his gaze falls upon her. It is a melting pot of artistic influences from the Dark Continent, located a world away in the Costa Rican subject's imagination. While the intended reader's exposure to West African cultures may be reduced, the black woman's body is upheld as proof that this ideal can be appreciated within national territory. An appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of the black body is the first lesson learned as the traveler begins the journey within to reconfigure an understanding of this culture on the bay.

The challenge posed to the intended reader is to repeatedly disidentify with crude observations made by individuals such as the bishop who visits Parima Bay to attend to his "desperdigada feligresía" but not without contemplating the discomforts, the mosquitoes and quinine pills he will have to take in an area where, "la zona era vasta, que en la costa estaban los negros y en las montañas los indios" (Lobo 60). The novel places a bet on the reader's desire to partake in magic without wanting all its secrets revealed. The

novel clearly directs the intended reader to repeatedly quell any limiting force that could be brought upon in this landscape. As Werner Mackenbach observes, the novel could be criticized for its heavy reliance on one of the grand archetypes of Latin American literature by recurring all too often to a Macondoized portrayal fitted to a Costa Rican tropical landscape. Nonetheless, Lobo seems to achieve “una metáfora acertada de la realidad caribeña en la era del ‘colonialismo postcolonial’. [...] El encanto del Caribe queda vedado” (Mackenbach 3). Against the destructive force of “progress” that threatens to engulf Parima Bay, *Calypso* covers three generations of women whose connection to paradisiacal nature is unquestioned and is forever theirs to safeguard.

While on the subject of secrets, it is more than adequate to refer here to Doris Sommers’ observations about guarded divulgations the testimonial subject, “a model for respectful, nontotalizing, politics” (48). Those secrets should not be read with either theoretical disdain or uncritical hero worship because, “the distance established can be read as a lesson in the condition of possibility for *coalitional politics*” with attention to the respect at the basis of a “love that takes care not to appropriate its object” (Emphasis mine, Sommer 48). Such is the approach taken by the narrator of *Calypso* as the reader encounters silences where curiosity would invite us to press further. One of those matters concerns the rituals and magic practiced by black women of Parima Bay, unknown to even to Lorenzo Parima, namesake of the town. Despite having lived among them for years, Lorenzo assures an interlocutor that “había escuchado hablar de pocomanía, pero los negros nunca tocaban ese tema con los blancos y jamás lo habían invitado a participar de sus misteriosas ceremonias” (Lobo 60). Women are present in references to syncretic

religions of West African origins and mystical references, such as transmutation. Like Emily, Amanda Scarlet's sister-in-law, some are born covered "en la tela que traen los escogidos y señalados con la gracia de ver dopis" (Lobo 52). The use of Twi, a language spoken in the Ivory and Gold Coasts, to name the spirit of the dead with whom these women communicate connects them to a heritage unknown to the intended reader. The connection is naturalized to the extent that, without italics or an explanation to accompany the use of the term, the reader too acquires the terms that have passed into daily use amongst these strong black women who have inherited a mystical tradition.

They are part of a genealogy of women who are rooted to the Costa Rican Atlantic Coast and bear the responsibility of ensuring the spiritual teachings of a world that cannot be learned in the confines of a schoolhouse. She is the elder who introduces Eudora, Amanda Scarlet's daughter, to the spirit world: "[Le explicó que] si uno se lo propone, el mundo cambia y puede hacerse diferente a la voluntad, que basta el abandono de sí mismo para poder ver un dopi y las cosas más transparentes" (Lobo 104). The common ground between the two ensures that the transmission of those ideas hold greater relevance to Eudora than the sterile lessons on science, civics and British grammar, taught as phrases children were forced to repeat until "la perezosa dicción local adquiría rigideces y estiramientos acordes con el corset de la reina" (Lobo 101).

Calypso manifests that a devotion to the spirit world cannot be carried out in any other place than the black world they inhabit. The female characters in these novels are cognizant of the fact that their black identity grants them access to these mystical traditions and that their femininity brings them in closer communication with an invisible

world. Eudora's cousin, Stella, is next in line to command the spirit of nature to her will. In one of the most beautiful scenes of the novel, the intended reader is invited to witness the power of Stella's incantations in the language she deems appropriate for communication with her ancestors:

De modo que cuando la albina intentaba comunicarse con sus ancestros, entre bastones pintados, flores secas y caracolas de mar, lo que en realidad hacía era invocar a las mariposas más bellas, las de grandes formas azules, con una letanía hipnótica y cadenciosa que sonaba como un canto gregoriano en la alucinante atmósfera nocturna de la selva tropical:

morpho cypris

morpho amathonte

morpho granadiensis

morpho peleides limpida

morpho theseres aquarius

morpho peleides marinita

morpho poliphemus catarina

Cantaba. Entonces, desde el bastón central, un resplandor de plata se extendía dulcemente hasta alcanzar los pies descalzos que danzaban siguiendo la ruta de un círculo invisible. Los únicos espectadores eran las lechuzas, escandalizadas de que las mariposas así invocadas acudieran a deshoras de la noche. Stella nunca las vio porque mantenía los ojos cerrados y confundía sus lentos aleteos con el susurro de sus antepasados, y su roce con las caricias de los abuelos. Un tupido

enjambre de delicados insectos de alas azules envolvía a la albina ocultando su fealdad ante los rayos del astro madre, hasta que ella se cansaba de danzar y entonces las mariposas espectrales se alejaban por el camino de la luna entre los árboles nacarados de placer. (Lobo 137)

The scientific names for butterflies that encircled Stella as she chanted their names came from notebooks belonging to an entomologist who had once lived in the village and dedicated his days to catching butterflies, pinning specimens to boards and recording the species found. Yet this empiricism is turned on its head as those same words in Latin are transformed by a mistress of supernatural forces as the thread that delicately ties together human body and insect world, much to the stunned amazement of an audience of personified trees caught in rapture at the stunning sight of butterflies circling around her. Beyond the reader, only the owls witness this magnificent union between mistress of the spirit world and her command of nature.

In line with narratives that work with the concept of black women's genealogies, most of the female characters in *Calypso* do not express any desire to leave their beloved Caribbean Sea for the Central Valley and its Pacific Ocean. One woman, Eudora, leaves and returns with the message that times have changed and that “ahora hay que integrarse al país, hay que aprender el español, no podemos vivir como mi padre, siempre soñando con volver a Jamaica” (Lobo 144). Her generation had witnessed Parima Bay's connection to the rest of the country by a long highway, vacationers who followed the road to virgin beaches, cricket fields turned to soccer fields, a picture of the President of the Republic to replace the image of Queen Victoria and the advent of electricity. This

last element changes landscape and people's everyday life: "Y como había sucedido con la inauguración del camino, la llegada triunfal de la luz eléctrica estuvo amenizada con encendidos discursos atiborrados de propaganda al gobierno [...]. Parima Bay perdía en encanto lo que ganaba en progreso" (Lobo 216-217). However, despite its compromised position, the practice of lighting candles and kerosene lamps continued among some individuals in the village in defiance of the "progress" brought to Parima Bay.

It is in this context that *Calypso* assures the intended reader that has made the trip to the Atlantic Coast that it remains a location that cannot be divorced from its mystical roots despite the changes that have occurred. Even as drug trafficking assaults this paradise, the black community remains firmly connected to the traditions and beliefs that highlight its difference from the intruders that arrive from the Central Valley. In the case of Eudora's daughter Matilda, the Atlantic Ocean itself is what makes life and adventure possible. Not only does she delight in fishing for lobsters in these waters, her many trips out to sea are a measure of the degree to which she has matured. In the most significant of these trips, she seeks to overcome the pain of losing her step-grandfather by taking a boat out to sea:

Matilda creció en ese viaje, maduró entre el oleaje encabritado, el mar fue todo suyo. El viento, el sol y el agua, castigaron su piel en lo que esta tenía de culpa por seguir viviendo. El abuelo y la araña Anansi la acompañaron hasta límites que jamás creyó alcanzar, jugando peligrosamente entre las aletas de tiburones, la mantelerías de las mantarrayas y los saltos de los delfines. Regresó agotada, las lágrimas confundidas con la sal, el corazón aliviado. (Lobo 232)

The ocean becomes a powerful metaphor for freedom as the young girl is released from pain and suffering by the furious waves and the creatures that circle around her. Her strength was in the way that she “circulaba por el mar y por la tierra con el mismo espíritu de libertad heredado de las mujeres [de su linaje], sin dedicarle pensamiento a la perversidad humana” (Lobo 253). Her remote location shields her from evil that lurks over the mountains in the major cities. So long as she is in this village, the ocean is her saving grace and emblem of the freedom that the women in her family are known for.

Limón Blues

Desire, the strong feeling of wanting to attain something in/tangible, informs the actions of the black community depicted in *Limón Blues*. The axis of individual romantic desire is intersected by the axis marking the community’s desire for dignity on a grid that could, at first light, be simply another revisionist novel. Based on an arsenal of documents that track the black diaspora in Limón from 1876 to the present day, this text questions what it means to be Costa Rican in the twenty-first century, as Sofia Kerns observes. This is a novel where “West Indians and female subalterns are represented in their different logics and motives but tied together by their political rebellion and empowered by their solidarity, thus undermining the myth of a classless, single-race, and strictly heterosexual nation” (Kerns 32). As such, it serves to detail the desires of the black diaspora while enunciating the goal of reconciliation between the neglected black populations with a white society that has continuously denied its existence.

In fact, one of the principal tasks of the text is to counter the common assumption—echoed in the first pages of *Calypso*—that blacks in Limón foolishly believed themselves

to be better than Costa Ricans. Instead of perpetuating the stereotype, the novel tracks the structural racism that barred this community from integrating into Costa Rican society.

The matter is solidly manifested when Orlandus recalls his mother's impressions of Limón when she arrived with her husband in 1876. They had fled from starvation in Jamaica and stepped foot on a dock that smelled of urine and vomit. She is struck by her new position and gazes first out to sea imagining her Jamaican homeland and then at the six rows of mountains behind the bay that mark the boundary between the Limón province and the "interior." While the blow to her husband weakens his morale, she is determined to survive. Nanah tells Orlandus:

Prince tu padre dejó caer la cabeza como un pollo muerto pero yo no lo dejé entristecerse, lo empujé hacia el Mercado, la ciudad estaba llena de gente y de actividad. Nos vimos en medio de mendigos hediondos con la piel llena de costras, sin manos, sin pies. Pregunté si venían de una Guerra y me dijeron que de la construcción del ferrocarril. [...] Había como cuatro veces más hombres que mujeres y yo me puse a hacer comida para los hombres solos. Había más antillanos que otras nacionalidades y al aprender español me di cuenta de que los preferidos de Escobar éramos los jamaquinos, nos decía que éramos nobles y de gran fortaleza. (Rossi 19-20)

The railroad became a "fábrica de duppies" that claimed the lives of one man for every wooden railroad tie that was laid. These high mortality rates were aggravated by the incidence of yellow fever to which the men were exposed. These deplorable factors made it impossible for Nanah and her husband to remain in Limón and they returned to

Jamaica. But in 1904 when the lure of harvesting bananas for private profit called another wave of Jamaicans, Nanah was convinced that a bright future lurked on the horizon for the family and urged a fourteen-year old Orlandus to try his luck in Limón. These opening pages put in the place a matrix indispensable for reading the rest of the novel, since they highlight the presence of push-pull factors that have caused immigration and the hostile climate that made life unbearable for immigrants.

Through a narrative structure that weaves the voices of men and women in the community, the remainder of *Limón Blues* acknowledges the overwhelming power of the government and the multinationals in Port Limón. Costa Rican authorities doubly protecting the United Fruit Company and government interests prey on the black railroad workers who, after being decommissioned due to their injuries, were granted private parcels of land. Since their destinies are bound to the decisions made by the government, their private holdings are revoked and they are forced to work for the United Fruit Company. Along with Orlandus, the intended reader learns of Minor Keith, the American also known as “The Uncrowned King of Costa Rica,” who built San José and was responsible for building its sewers, markets, piping, railroad, phone and electricity. As a black activist informs Orlandus:

La United Fruit tenía una fuerte relación con Minor C. Keith, la Northern Railways, el Ferrocarril de Costa Rica, el capataz yanqui del muelle metálico, la electricidad, el teléfono, el telégrafo, los cincuenta vapores de la Gran Flota Blanca, los transatlánticos de la Elders & Fyffes y muchas otras cosas, sucesos y empresas. (Rossi 40)

Orlandus remains unassuming and *unjudgmental*, becoming the vehicle through which the intended reader learns a Costa Rican story that blemishes the image of a country built on the coffee tradition, the official *History* one might find in history books.

Historical records indicate that a peasant economy was developed in the Central Valley in the early eighteenth century by families of small and medium agriculturalists with a strong mercantile vocation that soon became its principal social group. Cultivation of “the berry” was initially concentrated around San José, but it rapidly extended to other areas of the “interior” and ultimately “bent the entire country to its will;” between 1850 and 1890, the sale of coffee accounted for almost ninety percent of the country’s export earnings (Palmer and Molina 55). Coffee brought with it “culture,” as the poet Carlos Gagini emphatically declared:

Who’s the one who built the Theater?

Who do they call the golden bean?

Who’s the one who fills the Treasury?

And pays you profits swift and clean?

Coffee!

(qtd. in Palmer and Molina 55)

Coffee transformed the image of the nation and thus became the product most intimately tied to its conditions of possibility, leaving outside the national imaginary those subjects that were not part of coffee production. *Limón Blues* directs the intended reader away from an idealized conception of coffee production in the Central Valley and highlights

the extent to which the same man who guaranteed the long-standing lower class status of an immigrant class ensured the privileges of the coffee elites in San José.

Just as intellectuals waved the banner of liberalism, positivism and modernity affirming a “civilized” national identity in the Central Valley in late nineteenth century, so did the black population in Limón in the early twentieth century. Being citizens of Great Britain, they appealed for royal protection, hoping that the “Corona alargara su mano hasta Limón, Centroamérica, donde doscientos de St. Kitts se morían en la calle como perros sarnosos y miles de jamaquinos estaban sin trabajo por exigir que se les tratara con humanidad (Rossi 91). The Home Government responded by naming a Protector of Immigrants, a measure that was rapidly annulled as a result of the Jamaican Government’s opposition. Rather than die on their knees, as the saying goes, they saw in the figure of Marcus Garvey a leader that would see them through the tempest. In a moving fictional letter addressed to Orlandus, the intended reader learns of the motives of Garvey’s movement:

Usted me conoció cuando vivía en Port Limón. Sabe que viví en Panamá y que conocí Honduras, Nicaragua y Guatemala. Ahora quiero contarle que llegué hasta Ecuador. Pasé por Colombia y por Venezuela. Y en todos esos lugares yo vi lo mismo: los negros somos el fondo, la hez, no sabemos organizarnos duramente y no tenemos líderes. Cuando ya no soportamos más la injusticia, hacemos incendios. Entonces nos persiguen y nos martirizan. Y viendo todo eso yo me pregunté: ¿Dónde está el Gobierno del Hombre Negro? ¿Dónde su Reino, su Presidente, su País, su Embajador, su Ejército, su Fuerza Marina, sus hombres de

grandes negocios? No pude encontrarlos y entonces declaré: Yo voy a tratar de que existan. (Rossi 108)

The list of black communities that Garvey visited in Latin America reads like a statement of his credentials. It leaves no doubt as to the veracity of his conviction that the lamentable condition of black subjects merits critical attention. The reader is brought to understand that only a transnational project of epic magnitude, as intended by Marcus Garvey himself, can address the situation. The letter, inspired by historical documents issued from Garvey's own pen, is meant to redefine the intended reader's conception of Central America into an isthmus wherein black times and black places abound. In this context, *Limón Blues* justifies a movement that has been construed as an affront to the Costa Rican nation and elevates its importance by making its goals appear strikingly similar to those valued in the national imaginary.

The novel captures a critical point in the black Costa Rican experience. As Limón experiences the highs and lows of a local economy that is vulnerable to a tumultuous world market, the chapter of the United Negro Improvement Association founded in Limón is caught in the whirlwind of Marcus Garvey's transnational movement. No longer limited to the mutual aid societies erected in their insular locality, Limón rises as another black town where the UNIA raises a call for black self-sufficiency. In a tour de force, it is responsible for a surge of entrepreneurship: black businesses, black churches and black schools; exclusive black organizations like the African Legion and Explorers for men and the Black Cross Nurses for women; and, the notorious line of steamships known as the Black Star Line that bore the names of heroes like Frederic Douglass. In a

letter dated December 23, 1919 the UNIA was tagged by the Costa Rican government as, an “Asociación Universal que trata de organizar la raza de color en todo el mundo para fines anarquistas” (Rossi 212). The threat was in the attitude taken by Garvey’s followers who single-handedly financed the activities and organizations of the movement, a stance summed in the most beautiful of quotes associated with Marcus Garvey: *So down the line of history we come. Black, courtly, courageous and handsome*, epigraph to the chapter that follows the discussion of this letter.

Orlandus and his wife Irene, fictional characters representing the millions of blacks who supported the UNIA, dedicate their life and earnings to the movement. Yet *Limón Blues* does not hold the movement and its leader beyond reproach. It begins by questioning Garvey’s stance against the syncretic African religions he labeled vestiges of the savagery that needed to be eradicated amongst the decent black community that was being created. Irene, who was raised by a devout Cuban practitioner of the Regla de Ocha—Santería, as it is commonly known—is unwilling to suspend her belief in her intimate relationship to the *orishas*. Irene expresses her devotion to four *orishas* in particular in a conversation with her lover: “se supone que uno debe tener afinidad y devoción para ciertos Orishas y ellos nos protegen. Mi madre me salvó la vida en un río, eso me vincula a Ochún, una orisha importante. Pero tengo la sonrisa de Yemayá, y en un bembé otra orisha, Oyá, me señaló” (Rossi 178). The history of the Caribbean reveals that during slavery and after abolition, practicing African religions was openly against Cuban law, since “police ferociously persecuted ‘atavistic’ practices of African origin—Lucumi, Congo, Abakua, Arara— from the mid-1870s until the mid 1920s” (Brown 3).

Associating the Regla de Ocha with the principal female character in *Limón Blues* has three effects: it vindicates the religion itself, aligns any doctrine of suppression with colonialism and confirms this religion's relevance and connection to the specifically Afro-Caribbean experience.

Furthermore, the novel vividly depicts the frustrations of the masses in Limón and elsewhere that anxiously waited for their investments to come to fruition. In a telling passage, the officials of the UNIA chapter struggle to hold back the crowds of banana laborers who clamor: “¿Dónde están nuestros barcos, nuestros dividendos, los intereses por los famosos Liberian bonds?” (Rossi 242). Arrivals of the Black Star Line steam ships are announced and cancelled time and again. As Edmund David Cronon indicates, even today it is difficult to judge Garvey as “a strident demagogue or dedicated prophet, martyred visionary or fabulous con man” (202). His ability to awaken the imagination of the black masses and to intuitively put his finger on the pulse of his race, as Cronon so elegantly states it, is irreproachable. Yet records also indicate him to be a master propagandist that invested the savings of his followers in a movement that did not bring them returns. This meant that Marcus Garvey and his movement were under scrutiny by his contemporaries: “Few Negro leaders of his day agreed completely either Garvey's program or his czarlike methods of implementing it. Yet Garvey's energy and driving force had an important effect on Negro leadership” (Cronon 210). *Limón Blues* does not dispute the power of the movement, but it subtly brings to bear the greater relevance of investing that pride in Costa Rica rather than a movement that purports to connect the black diaspora in a transnational enterprise.

Once again, it is Irene who highlights a key issue in the UNIA rhetoric, one that pertains to the West Indian's permanence in Costa Rica. As Orlandus states:

Irene me hizo notar que en sus discursos Garvey hablaba mucho de la repatriación a Liberia y la liberación del África, y poco de cómo conseguir aquí y ahora una vida mejor. Otros también lo notaron, y en una de las últimas reuniones se formó una delegación para preguntarle qué había obtenido de Presidente Acosta relativo a que se les diera a los negros mayores derechos en Costa Rica. (Rossi 275)

The transition is monumental, since it brings to bear the emerging consciousness of a population that saw their checkmate situation in the country of their residence, forgoing the vision of a better future in Africa. That the novel brings to the table the discussion of Costa Rica as an increasingly xenophobic country, even when it pertains to black subjects born on Costa Rican soil is equally relevant. The conversation continues:

Prosperaríamos si no nos discriminaran. Costa Rica nos gusta, es tranquilo, hay trabajo, hay tierra; pero no nos permiten ser propietarios; los hijos nuestros nacidos aquí no son considerados costarricenses; no ven con buenos ojos que vayamos a la capital ni a las otras comarcas; además nos insultan – maifrenes, chumecos- y aquí mismo en Port Limón ahora nos prohíben entrar en casi todos los hoteles, restaurantes y balnearios. Eso no es vida. (Rossi 275)

Limón Blues escapes the Manichean condemnation of the white Costa Rican and the black Costa Rican in this pivotal exchange that highlights the existence of two worlds at the expense of the black subjects of the nation. Edwin Zalas Zamorra affirms that blacks were not allowed in the Central Valley; a law that was not repealed until 1949 explicitly

prohibited the West Indian population from crossing Turrialba, a town in the Atlantic Coast located sixty miles from the Central Plateau (7). Speaking as an insider of the Central Valley, this critic explains that the *meseteño* has long conceived of the black Caribbean subject as “un tipo de vagabundo y lujurioso, proclive a los vicios e incapaz de generar algo positivo. Asociado, además, con la falta de higiene en su alimentación y proclive al mal por el solo color de su piel” (Zalas Zamorra 7). Per *Limón Blues*, the exchange between Marcus Garvey and his Costa Rican followers highlights the black diaspora’s assessment of domestic policies that have long excised them from the national imaginary as citizens of equal value.

In a novel that repeatedly makes Irene an agent of change of critical assessment of the political situation, the narrative makes its last appeal to the power embodied by women in its final pages. Irene becomes a widow and as the bridge between the first-generation black Caribbean immigrants who held steadfastly to their identities as citizens of the Antilles and the second-generation who must choose whether or not to accept Costa Rican citizenship, Irene carries the symbolic burden of deciding what she will teach her children. Remarking upon the challenges her children face in Limón, she decides to go to San José just as other black families have done. To this, a friend insists that they must become citizens if they plan to leave their insular community: “será tu única defensa cuando no te dejen entrar a un cine o subirte a un autobús, o cuando alguien te insulte en la calle. En esta época de nacionalismos, al que no tenga un estado bajo el cual ampararse le puede ir muy mal” (Rossi 401). The matter at hand is not to deny that segregation will exist in the Central Valley, but to arrive in this white space

bearing the document that provides uncontested proof that the black subject belongs within the borders of the nation.

That the subject that comes to the interior bearing such evidence is a recently widowed black woman with three children in tow is a factor that cannot be overlooked. Motherhood is political. Charged with the responsibility of bearing new life and of propagating values, a mother is subjected to the power of discourse. In this instance, discourse commands the next generation's smooth integration—legally and imaginary—into the nation. As Irene's friend states in relation to her children:

Look at me, I'm a staunch Britisher, y ese orgullo nadie jamás me lo quitará. Tenemos nuestras tradiciones, organizamos nuestros debates con emoción sabiéndonos herederos de Cambridge y Oxford. We are Britishers, decimos inflando el pecho cuando un costarricense nos humilla, y nos sabemos superiores a ellos en refinamiento. Pero tu hijo, ¿qué posee? Un idioma que no le sirve en esta república, más bien le impide integrarse, un idioma que no representa su nacionalidad porque él ya no es británico por más que quiera. Por esa razón esos golfos se vengan en el inglés, envileciéndolo, usándolo para decir palabrotas. [Hay algunos que] aman el inglés y se identifican con los valores de sus padres. Yo sólo me pregunto qué futuro tienen en esta república. (Rossi 402)

The novel closes with the certainty that Irene should leave her community to seek opportunities in San José, bearing a passport for herself and her children, and relinquishing the English language so that her children may be better integrated into the Costa Rican nation. There is no pretense of this being a solution to the challenge of

belonging, but there is a yearning to make the transition smoother. Here, we are reminded that the political spectrum from right to left collaborates in forming the institution of motherhood, which regulates acceptable practices, restricts annoying expression, and designates appropriate spaces for action and institutes a reward/punishment system for compliance and lack thereof. The representation of the maternal figure in literary discourses is an important strategic maneuver, particularly when what is at stake is a narrative that intends to reconfigure the existing image of a nation in the name of multiculturalism.

A Neoliberal Literary Trend in Praxis

“Fostering cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and a culture of peace” is one of the overarching objectives of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Its mission, according to its website, is to create the conditions that foster the dialogue necessary to achieve “global visions of sustainable development encompassing observance of human rights, mutual respect and the alleviation of poverty.” The San José, Costa Rica field office is the responsible party for six of the seven Central American countries (the notable exception being Belize, which is under direction of the Kingston, Jamaica office) and as such, is the beacon that is expected to steer this critical dialogue in the direction best aimed to achieve the aforementioned goals and objectives. It is an active office that regularly posts on its website the initiatives that best reflect its adherence to the UN-established areas of greatest concern. On March 11, 2011 the field office announced a strategic plan between UNESCO and the Consejo Regional Autónomo del Atlántico Norte (CRAAN) to work collaboratively to bring about

the development of six communities of indigenous and African descent in the country's Caribbean Coast. Like the March 28, 2011 law enacted by Costa Rican legislators, these two initiatives are not coincidental. The UN General Assembly established 2011 as the International Year for People of African Descent. It is symbolically important in its aim to strengthen national, regional and international cooperation so that the black diaspora may attain "full enjoyment of economic, cultural, social, civil and political rights, their participation and integration in all political, economic, social and cultural aspects of society, and the promotion of a greater knowledge of and respect for their diverse heritage and culture." A reversal of discriminatory practices dating millennia is not expected in 365 days; what is anticipated is a string of "best practices" that can be displayed as exemplary strategies by those who advocate, as the United Nations does, for cultural rights and dignity of all peoples.

In the language used by the United Nations and the international community, "best practices" are defined as examples of successful initiatives which: have a demonstrable and tangible impact on improving people's quality of life; are the result of effective partnerships between the public, private and civic sectors of society; are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable. Furthermore, they are promoted and used as a means of improving public policy based on what works; raising awareness of decision-makers at all levels and of the public of potential solutions to common social, economic and environmental problems; and, sharing and transferring knowledge, expertise and experience through networks and learning. I'd like to close with the proposition that the novels studied here, *Calypso* and *Limón Blues*, read like the literary

blueprints for the “best practices” to be taken in the era of globalization in Central America. They clearly predate the 2011 International Year for People of African Descent, but they bear the signature stamp of the cultural clauses of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international covenants that were designed to induce government and civil society to bring an end to discrimination. These novels endeavor to raise awareness about the historical injustices committed against the black diaspora in the “Switzerland of Central America,” to raise awareness of the challenges they continue to face and to highlight the community’s points of pride that can be shared with Costa Rican society at large.

Late capitalism thrives on flirtation with the “other.” Slavoj Žižek argues that liberal multiculturalism and its politically correct premise of respecting difference is hegemonic, since subjects continue to be absorbed into the homogenizing power of multinational capital despite the discourse that pretends otherwise (45). The case of Central America brings to bear a region-specific approach to the integration of difference that has become an essential element of discourse since the Peace Accords were signed in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Something akin to “peace” was institutionalized in that decade and proof of it was the ratification of the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement on July 28, 2005 and its final approval by Costa Rica on October 7, 2007. The scale of economic and cultural grievances arguably disturbs the notion of democratization that gives international credibility and ideological legitimacy to neoliberal policies, but this monumental agreement across the isthmus seems to gloss the social ruptures that it may have aggravated.

As William I. Robinson has indicated, the isthmus' cultural production in this period is faced with the "search for viable formulas of social and economic democratization, political empowerment and the construction of a counter-hegemony under new conditions of global capitalism" (20). Whereas Central America has consistently relied on international markets for the circulation of its cultural texts, the present neoliberal moment with its rhetoric of multiculturalism responds to and indeed *satisfies* the desire for texts that speak to these "newly discovered" pluralist societies themselves. Stated differently, Central American cultural production caters to an isthmian readership that are key to our regional authors' very viability. This can be illustrated through two brief examples related to the two texts I have examined in this final chapter.

Inés Izquierdo Miller, a name that draws my attention for its very bicultural nature, opens her article titled, "Las orishas en *Calypso*," with the statement that the novel shows an impassioned and wonderful world where the characters move through a lush and wild landscape where the ill-termed concept of civilization has no place. In the first person plural she adds, "Y aunque parezca fantasía, nosotros tercermundistas íntegros sabemos que ésa es la realidad y el pan nuestro de cada día de nuestras infelices tierras" (1). Irony aside, Izquierdo Miller adds in the first person singular that, "por mi condición caribeña y mi inmediatez en algunos aspectos me he sentido identificada con ciertos elementos [de la religión afrocaribeña]," allowing me to understand from her words that the black world of the text speaks to her experience as a black woman with an intimate knowledge of that denied and neglected magically feminine Caribbean Coast featured in the novel.

The second example hails from a dramatically different source: the Costa Rican Ministry of Education. A quick online search of the book reveals a vital document for the citizenry of this nation. I refer to the mandatory reading list prescribed for the primary, secondary, tertiary levels for the 2011 academic year. Here the observer finds Ana Cristina's *Limón Blues* listed twice. Once, for the eleventh year of the *Educación diversificada* track under the category "Costa Rican Literature," and in the second instance, for the twelfth years of the *Educación técnica* track under the category "Postmodern Costa Rican Literature."

These are two examples from different points in the national imaginary that indicate that the process of making diversity in literature a best practice is a result of the need, indeed the desire, to use the neoliberal rhetoric of multiculturalism to fill the cracks and crevices that separate two worlds—that of the liminal citizenry and the long-heralded rightful citizenry—in the discourse of the nation. If reconciliation in the former warring countries was achieved through the institution of tribunals and truth commissions, Costa Rica emerges as that classic mythically ethical nation that is ready to address the grievances caused to its black diaspora. We return to that trusty *Reconciliation after Violent Conflict: A Handbook* for deeper insight:

We promote democracy and reconciliation for pragmatic reasons. There is a moral case to be made that reconciliation is the right thing to do. But there is also a powerful pragmatic argument to be made: positive working relationships generate the atmosphere within which governance can thrive, while negative relations will work to undermine even the best system of governance. (Bloomfield et al. 2003)

The act of multicultural reconciliation is indeed strictly pragmatic, since in both the literary and governmental worlds in the context of global connections, words can stand for themselves as “best practices.”

Conclusion

This study was intended to highlight “the black question” as the Achilles heel of Central American nation formation and intellectual history from Independence through the twenty-first century. The Caribbean and Central America might very well appear to be dissimilar regions but despite their distinct historical trajectories, there exist overlapping rhetorical strategies in “writing the black body” that cannot be overlooked. Generalizing the black body and universalizing that position is in fact a feature of writings that grapple and grasp blackness in Central America. The different positions that bodies—black, indigenous and *mestizo*—occupy are marked by topographic conditions and their proximity to the locus of the nation-state. The imaginary reaches of the public sphere that governs the localization and movement of those bodies condition their race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender. The privileges granted to “legitimate” and “liminal” citizens are likewise granted along those intersecting axes.

Examining literature allowed me to consider how the political discussions regarding the rightful belonging of black diaspora in Central America could be gleaned in the fictions of the isthmus. The focus on literature allowed me to achieve an analysis of transformation of narrative modes and cultural identities as the black diaspora grew to include colonial descendants of black slaves, West Indian and Afro-indigenous communities. Like the indigenous peoples of the isthmus, they are an indelible group that

has demanded accountability and recognition. Never fully forgotten nor fully recognized as citizens, members of the black diaspora constitute a liminal citizenry that has been reinforced as such in the literary history of Central America. In my analysis, literary discourse is the proverbial “ball and chain” that keeps the black peoples of Central America shackled to the representations, secured and prevented from escaping subjection. These are constructions that emerge when the first Afro-descendants have themselves become *the* hegemony.

The first chapter of this dissertation highlighted a gradual subversion of the intellectual institutions that underscored the gradual passing of the diaspora from the category of *negro* to *moreno* to *mestizo*, all appellations with profound repercussions at the rhetorical, political and socio-economic levels. The second chapter demonstrated that paradigmatic authors negotiated the crisis of Central American nation-state formation by embarking upon a project to produce written works of art wherein blackness was given an ornamental place, establishing the otherworldliness of blackness—an element that would henceforth always be located on any other shore but that of the Pacific Ocean. The third chapter brought us to the mid-twentieth century and the discourses of eugenics and mappings of an unchartered Atlantic Coast. The blacks within Central American borders were construed as new arrivals: the marooned and exploited workers who lived on the fringes of imperialism and imposed troubles on the already broken *mestizo* nations. The fourth chapter addressed the importance of Mesoamerica as a reference point for national imaginaries across Central America and its signature importance to Guatemala. It explored the metaphorical friction between black and indigenous peoples in one work and

extended the discussion to the Belizean/Guatemalan border, pointing to the everlasting centrality of an uncertainty about the points of articulation of an indigenous and black past in these two countries. Finally, chapter five explored two contemporary novels whose common point of articulation is diversity and inclusion. Forces external to the nation-state have tinged political rhetoric in the thirty years between the clamor for an initiative and the enactment of a law that validates black experience in Costa Rica. These novels, as well as governmental projects that celebrate cultural plurality, respond to these dynamics.

Literature is produced to be circulated and is circulated in order to be consumed by its intended readership. These phases of cultural production have designated literature as perhaps the most elitist of forms and as such have contributed to its classification as a predominantly Western, white, male and heterosexist practice. In Central America, as is the case elsewhere, literature is the battleground on which ideological struggles are fought and the demarcations of dominance are drawn. It is a site fraught with conflicts designed with the overall intention of wielding power over subjects outside the hegemonic order with the authority of images wrought from words. With few exceptions, the literature examined in this project takes a historically grounded approach to the inventory of “rightful” and “liminal” citizenry. As the case of the black diaspora in Central America demonstrates, liminality is not solely predicated on alterity. Indigeneity *could* be as “other” as blackness.

A central distinguishing factor is, as my study posits, the multiple points of origin and articulation allotted for in the black Central American experience. The perceived core

of indigeneity finds its place in the highlands of Central America, in the cultural practice of tilling the land and in the experience of a plundered and decimated people. The liminal quality of black experience is inherent in its escape from such constrictive geographic, socio-economic and experiential estimations. Writings of the colonial period tracked blackness spilling over into prestigious positions in both rural and urban contexts; texts in the aftermath of independence located blackness in the orientalist motifs of an array of the great literary masters; early twentieth century novels designated the Atlantic Coastal strip for the instrumental plotting of blackness; other works allowed blackness to upstage indigeneity in a deft maneuver aiming to highlight its inapplicability to a isthmus heaviness invested in its claim to a Mesoamerican grandeur; and more contemporary works find in blackness a key element for investment and attraction for capital development and tourism. The five chapters that comprise this dissertation, then, demonstrate the extent to which blackness is a liminal element to national and local imaginaries. As key socio-economic shifts bring these imaginaries into crisis, cultural memory is activated and so too are the means of entrapment of blackness refreshed.

This dissertation tracked the representation of blackness from the colonial to the contemporary period in order to begin to answer a question of importance in the field of Central American studies: Why is it at this moment in 2011, when Central America finds itself at the threshold of neoliberal political and economic reconfiguration that Central American intellectuals return to the myths and realities of the black diaspora? This research shows Central American literary production to be an oeuvre at the intersection of multicultural polyphonic Caribbean, Latin American and Black Atlantic literary and

cultural traditions. These are overlapping traditions that have left their mark on national imaginaries. As such, they also require that we evaluate multicultural discourses and their impact on contemporary national discourses that continue to design sensibilities of belonging to Central America.

I am devoted to this area of study and will continue to expand on these themes. Several of the chapters make a note of projects I have commenced as well as hypotheses I would like to explore in future presentations and publications. I am particularly interested in pursuing three future projects building on my dissertation: the Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.) movement in the Caribbean and Central America, the Anglophone press of the Central American Atlantic Coast and the migratory patterns of ethno-linguistic enclaves across urban/rural divides in Central and North America. I truly foresee a wealth of opportunities for further investigation of the ethno-linguistic lines of investigation addressed in this project. This is, after all, a venture into a rich terrain of cultural dynamics as proposed in the preliminary pages of this dissertation.

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