

IN THESE NEOLIBERAL TIMES: BLACKNESS IN THE MULTICULTURAL COSTA RICAN NATION

Jennifer Gómez Menjívar
University of Minnesota, Duluth

The socio-economic restructuring that occurred in Central America in the aftermath of the civil wars led to the rise of neoliberal discourses and multicultural discussions. This rhetoric resulted in a new “awareness” of cultural diversity and ethnic pluralism, and led to the emergence of multicultural initiatives at local and national levels. The spillover effect of such projects on contemporary literary production is noteworthy, particularly when it involves narratives that aim to rewrite History from a black perspective. This essay focuses on two Costa Rican novels and the strategies they use to take their intended readers to “black times” and “black places” on the Atlantic Coast, enveloping them in a wider neoliberal and multiculturalist project that aims to reassess both national and regional identities.

The Central American revolutionary movements of the 1970s and the 1980s led to a cultural boom that saw the rise of testimonial literature and revolutionary poetry. The social upheaval that occurred during this period transformed the isthmus and the narratives written during these decades capture the rise of marginalized voices, including those of women and indigenous people. 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. As Frauke Gewecke demonstrates, Central American women’s narratives of the 1980s reflect a radical critique of society 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. Precarious and often perilous alliances were forged across generations, social classes and indigenous groups, and 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. According to Laura Barbas-Rhoden, many of these texts 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" (Rhoden 3). Cultural production became an ideological weapon, a solid critique of *History* and its role in the subjugation of "others."

It was during this time that there emerged notable Afro-Central American writers at the two extremes of the isthmus, including the Belizean Zee Edgell and the Panamanian Carlos "Cubena" Guillermo Wilson, who captured the black experience in their texts and became prominent names in their respective nations. In the unlikelyst of Central American nations, one in which the myth of whiteness has been propagated for centuries, there emerged an author who broke the code of whiteness like no other. Costa Rica's own Quince Duncan developed plots based on personal experiences of discrimination in his home country, leading a small readership to open their eyes to blackness and racial inequity in their country. Today, Quince Duncan's writing reflects a shift away from the Costa Rican context to activism advocating for racial equality on national, regional and global levels. It is this change in the scope of racial and ethnic discourses that concerns us in this article. The 1970-1980s allowed some Central

Americans to recognize the pigmentocracy and racial apartheid in their nations, and cultural production since the 1990s has reflected regional and global concerns about the place of what I call the *liminal citizenry* of Central America, particularly indigenous and black citizens (Gómez Menjívar 19).

There are two specific trends in today's Central American cultural production. Though it is beyond the scope of this study to explore the themes of "mainstream" contemporary literature and culture, it is important to mention that it focuses on a variety of issues in the private sphere that were once taboo topics of discussion in "polite society." This cultural production runs the tropes of pain, pleasure, death, perversion and abuse, among others. As Beatriz Cortez asserts, "contemporary fiction suggests that it is not morality but passion that moves the individual beyond reason or his consideration of values of any type" (27). The characters in these narratives have a passion for defining the standards of decency, morality and other principles fundamental to the symbolic order. They are similar to the post-dictatorship narratives of Argentina and Chile in the sense that they reflect "[the inability to portray the] experience of happiness, the struggle to defend the body that needs to act, the predominance of life over death, the immanence of power" (Cortez 38). The other trend is the focus of the present essay. Cultural production since the 1990s has provided forums to discuss issues of race and ethnicity, both in political and literary arenas. Interventions like those we will examine here represent a radical departure from constructions of the national subject — *mestizo* or white, male, middle-class— and his national history. Focusing on Costa Rica, which has been constructed as a beacon for human rights and stability, allows us to examine a situation that has had a ripple effect throughout Central America.

This essay focuses on the manner in which Central American multicultural narratives grant “ethnic plurality” and the “nation” center stage. This reflects an intentional departure from colorblindness and an investment in thwarting the institutional racism that has gripped the world of letters and social institutions alike. Through my analysis of Ana Cristina Rossi’s *Limón Blues* and Tatiana Lobo’s *Calypso*, I argue that though these novels are charged with essentialist depictions of black experience, their value lies in their objective: these texts take what they purport to be quintessentially ethnic ways of being, seeing and knowing in order to show the cracks and crevices of the hegemonic Central American regional imaginary that has historically excluded “others.” The essay concludes with a discussion of the worldwide acknowledgement of multiculturalism and cultural difference that has put institutional racism under the microscope. With its policy of political correctness, the present political moment ushers in the rhetoric that makes it possible to investigate the plurifaceted nature of Central American experience. What better place to begin investigating this discursive turn than Costa Rica, a country known outside of its borders as a culturally —and ethnically— homogeneous nation.

Myth: “The Switzerland of Central America”

Historical records indicate that a peasant economy was developed in Costa Rica’s 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;” but 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 in 1890:

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! (Gagini, 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 as a modern country, leaving in the fringes of the national imaginary those inhabitants who were not part of coffee production. European immigrants flooded Costa Rica’s gates in order to take part in the boom and the power of the coffee elites concentrated in the country’s Central Valley (Gudmundson 58). Due to its perceived ethnic homogeneity, its professed stability and its remarkable economic growth during this period, Costa Rica was heralded the “Switzerland of Central America.”

A set of cultural myths were diffused and repeated in order to authenticate Costa Rica’s status as the “Switzerland of Central America.” From the nineteenth century forward, this Central American republic became 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). Whiteness, the most “exported” of its legends, became anchored in interpretations of the nation’s colonial past and the neocolonial ventures in investment capitalism it pursued much later. Travelers to Costa Rica corroborated the myth of whiteness that circulated beyond Costa Rica’s borders. Writing in 1844, for instance, a Scotsman named

Glasgow Dunlop stated: “the inhabitants of the state of Costa Rica are almost all white, having not mixed with Indians as has been the case in other parts of Spanish America, and the few of color have arrived without a doubt from neighboring states” (Dunlop 84). Despite the ethnic heterogeneity of Costa Rica’s Atlantic Coast and the eugenics movement that fueled nationalist stances against the Afro-Caribbean labor force concentrated in the coastal strip, the myth of whiteness was largely unquestioned for generations.

The Jamaican-born black immigrants who settled in the Limón Province in the early twentieth century were fully aware that they were third class citizens in Costa Rica. They responded by establishing a chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) on Costa Rican soil, promoting economic self-sufficiency and developing a literary/artistic tradition that promoted the notion of a unified black world. Cronon (1969) and other scholars have written critical studies of the UNIA and “Black Moses,” Marcus Garvey himself; I focus here on the literary representation of the movement and the historical figure on the black peoples of Costa Rica in the early twentieth century. Santiago Valencia Chalá observes that 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. This is the world that Anacristina Rossi captures in the novel, *Limón Blues* (2002). Set in Costa Rica’s Limón Province in 1904, the narrative focuses on 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. Ending with the family’s departure from the Limón Province, the novel chronicles the destiny of the often forgotten West Indian immigrant community in Costa Rica.

Limón Blues interweaves the voices of men and women in the community as the novel

details the prejudice and racism that two generations of black Jamaican immigrants were subjected to in this poignant historical period. The connection between the trials and tribulations of the two groups is established when Orlandus recalls his mother's impressions of Limón back in 1876 when she arrived with her husband to work on the railroad. They had fled from starvation in Jamaica only to step foot on a dock that smelled of urine and vomit. Nanah was struck by her new position in this foreign country 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." Determined to survive, she tells her son:

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, highlighting the presence of push-pull factors that led to the founding of black coastal communities, as well as the hostile climate so unbearable for immigrants.

Costa Rican authorities doubly protecting United Fruit Company and government interests prey on the first wave of black immigrants, black railroad workers, as well as the second wave of black immigrants who were hired to work on the banana plantations. The context is clearly laid out for the reader: “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). In a deft narrative maneuver, Orlandus becomes the vehicle through which the reader learns about the modes of resistance adopted by the black masses in this context.

Rather than allow the big money magnates to take away their dignity, the West Indian community in Limón turns to Marcus Garvey as the leader who will see them through the tempest. In a moving fictional letter addressed to Orlandus, Marcus Garvey’s states his objectives in founding the United Negro Improvement Association:

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 reader's conception of Central America into an isthmus wherein black times and black places abound. No longer limited to the mutual aid societies erected by private citizens in their insular locality, Port Limón rises as a black town among many that advocate for black self-sufficiency. In a never before seen *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.

The government was watchful of these developments. In a letter dated December 23, 1919 the UNIA was tagged by the Costa Rican government as, "a Universal Association that attempts to organize the entire black race in the world for anarchist purposes" (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. Thus, *Limón Blues* justifies a movement that has long been construed as an affront to the Costa Rican nation. It challenges nationalist historians who have catalogued the movement as a separatist and anti-Costa Rican association that preached spite against Costa Rican culture. Not only can the reader gauge the historical necessity of the movement, s/he is brought to understand dignity as a core value of the West Indian community in Puerto Limón.

Edwin Zalas Zamorra states that black Costa Ricans 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. 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 social 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 n.p.). *Limón Blues* posits that Marcus Garvey’s movement led black Costa Ricans to assess the domestic policies that have long excised them from the national imaginary as citizens of equal value. These ideas, conveyed through historical figures as well as fictional characters asserting their place in Costa Rican society, convey a struggle for visibility that has been waged in the nation for more than a century.

Fiction: Black in the Tropics

The point of departure for Tatiana Lobo's *Calypso* is slightly different. It situates the reader away from Puerto Limón to a remote fishing village. Set in Parima Bay, Tatiana Lobo's *Calypso* (1996) tracks the destinies of three women —Amanda, Eudora, and Matilda— and their female relatives. Since it covers three generations of women, the novel also tracks the socio-economic changes that transform this coastal town from an isolated hamlet to the contemporary tourist's paradise of today. In the span of time from 1941 to the 1990s, 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 in the Atlantic Coast. Although the novel recurs to a Macondoized portrayal fitted to a Costa Rican tropical landscape, it achieves a powerful depiction of the Caribbean in the era of “postcolonial colonialism” (Mackebach 5). We are no longer in Costa Rica's Central Valley, the cradle of nationhood and whiteness. We are in the tropics.

As readers, we are invited to travel *back to the tropics*. We traverse space and time in order to find ourselves in an everlasting black tropical paradise where black women are present in references to syncretic religions of West African origins and mystical references. Like Emily, Amanda's sister-in-law, some are born covered in the fabric worn by those who have chosen and given the grace of seeing *dopis*. The use of Twi, a language spoken in the Ivory Coast and the Gold Coast, 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 spiritual term, the reader too acquires the terms that have passed into daily use amongst these strong black women who

have inherited a mystical tradition. In this context, the women become important agents in the preservation of the past and the building of the future of their community.

Black women 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. Stella 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 adquiriría rigideces y estiramientos acordes con el corset de la reina" (Lobo 101).

One woman, Eudora, leaves the village 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 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.

Thus, the fishing village remains a location that cannot be divorced from its mystical roots despite the changes that have occurred. Even as drug trafficking and ecotourism 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. For Matilda —the last young woman in a long line of mystical women— 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, and so 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 emblematic of the freedom that the women in her family are known to possess.

In this way, *Calypso* and *Limón Blues* display the same desire to challenge the hegemonic Costa Rican national imaginary from which Afro-Costa Rican subjects have been excluded by focusing on the black experience on the Atlantic Coast. The novels oblige the reader to look to past black times and lost black places in order to deconstruct and reassemble his/her memory of the Costa Rican nation. In order 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* 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 privilege women’s experience and attempt to bridge the gap between *History* and *history* by focusing on the transformation of Afro-Caribbean migrants into Costa Rican citizens.

A Neoliberal Tend in Practice

Afro-Costa Rican writer Quince Duncan and historian Carlos Meléndez posed a critical question in the prologue to their groundbreaking essay, “El negro en Costa Rica” (1972):

¿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, it was becoming necessary to take steps to break down the barriers that separated the old *ticos* from the “new” ones, the descendants of Jamaican workers who had been born on Costa Rican soil but had not yet been accepted into the Costa Rican foil. The essay developed an argument that racism was due to the failure to acknowledge both the reality of institutional racism and ethnic tension in interpersonal relationships. Their

observations led them to conclude that in the decades before the beginning of a new century, their country was faced with two options: “Costa Rica puede quedarse con los brazos cruzados y perderlo. Costa Rica puede incorporarlo, transformándose ella en el proceso” (Meléndez and Duncan 256). As Costa Rica became a beacon of human rights and stability during the years that war ravaged the Central American isthmus, discussions about racism and ethnic integration as they were discussed in Costa Rica had a ripple effect throughout Central America. Indeed, texts like those we have examined in this essay seem to respond to that critical question and solution proposed by Duncan and Meléndez.

Limón Blues and *Calypso* 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—and 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 from outside the Central Valley, the cradle of what has been improperly termed “Costa Rican culture,” is an audacious political maneuver.

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). There have been numerous criticisms leveled at multicultural discourse and the rhetoric of cultural diversity for their connection to the segmentation of global markets (Trigo 18). Yet narratives like the ones we have examined here highlight the way in which literature now engages in an intimate dance with neoliberal practices to showcase the multicultural nation. 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 post-war (1979-Present) period.

Costa Rica’s Black Heritage Festival, for example, developed as a result of the movement headed by the Teacher’s Union in 1980 to establish August 31st as the “Día Nacional de la Persona Negra y la Cultura Afrocostarricense” in the school calendar; this was affirmed by Decree N° 11938, signed by then President Rodrigo Carazo (Vargas Porras n.p.). 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. (Valdo n.p.)

While these words are specifically relevant to the newly implemented law, they also confirm that the locus of enunciation for discourses on diversity and inclusion has shifted from militant 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 conceptualization of pluralistic Central American societies that appeals to both governments and civil society.

“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 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” (UNESCO). 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. 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. The initiative is not an anomaly. The UN General Assembly established 2011 as the International Year for People of African Descent. This declaration was symbolically important in its aim to strengthen national, regional and international cooperation so that the black diaspora could 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" (UN General Assembly Resolution 64/169 1-2). A reversal of discriminatory practices dating centuries was not expected in 365 days; what *was* anticipated was a string of "best practices" that could be displayed as exemplary strategies by those governments who align themselves with the UN's stance on the cultural rights of black peoples across the globe.

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 governments 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 exploiting others while flirting with the "other." Slavoj Žižek argues that liberal multiculturalism and its politically correct premise of respecting and celebrating difference is disingenuously hegemonic, since subjects continue to be absorbed into the homogenizing power of multinational capital despite the discourse that pretends otherwise (Žižek 28). 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" (Robinson 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. Their reputation precedes the novels, for the Internet provides a forum for a vast array of readers who can attest to the transformative power of these novels in their blogs and social media posts online. Inés Izquierdo Miller, for instance, states that due to her "Caribbean condition" she has identified with certain elements of the Afro-Caribbean religion as depicted in the novel (1-3). Her article prompts us to understand 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. Furthermore, the Costa Rican government itself has played a role in promoting such narratives as a historical/literary document for its citizens. Ana Cristina Rossi's *Limón Blues* is listed twice on the mandatory reading list prescribed for the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels for the 2011 academic year. 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.”

The national imaginary is being reconstructed from multiple points, including personal discoveries and official mandates. Thus, 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 mythically ethical nation that is ready to address the grievances caused to its black diaspora (Bloomfield et. al. 11). An observation from *Reconciliation after Violent Conflict* provides us with deeper insight into what is at stake in today’s neoliberal period:

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. 11)

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.” The power of neoliberal discourse in Central America cannot be denied, for it even taints today’s literary practices. It has become imperative to reshape and revise official

discourses, both literary and political, to recognize blackness within Central American borders. Contemporary literary and political practices can allow outsiders to become responsible citizens and tourists who engage in a “ethical ethnotourism,” in order to revisit the black times and black places of the multicultural nation to vindicate black experience. Thus, in this final transformation of discourses regarding blackness in Central America, we see the ethical imperative pushed by the global gaze, which has itself been prompted by Central America’s recent turn to neoliberalism.

Works Cited

Barbas-Rhoden, Laura. *Writing Women in Central America: Gender and the Fictionalization of History*. Athens: Center for International Studies at the Ohio University, 2003.

Bloomfield, David, Teresa Barnes and Luc Huyse. *Reconciliation after Violent Conflict*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2003.

Brenes Molina, José Jacinto. “Entrevista a Tatiana Lobo: literatura y sociedad.” *Revista Comunicación* 12 (2002): 1-7.

Cortez, Beatriz. *Estética del cinismo: pasión y desencanto en la literatura centroamericana de posguerra*. Guatemala: F & G Editores, 2009.

Cronon, Edmund David. *Black Moses: the story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969.

Duncan, Quince and Carlos Meléndez. *El negro en Costa Rica*, San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 1972.

Dunlop, Glasgow. "Viajes en Centroamérica." *Costa Rica en el siglo XIX. Antología de viajeros.*

Ed. Ricardo Fernández Guardia. San José, Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1982.
(79-94)

Gewecke, Frauke. "Tres estudios sobre la narrativa centroamericana escrita por mujeres."

Istmo: revista virtual de estudios culturales centroamericanos. 10 Oct 2006. Web. 6 June 2010.

Gómez Menjívar, Jennifer Carolina. *Liminal Citizenry: Black Experience in the Central American Intellectual Imagination.* Ohio State University, 2011. Dissertation.

Gudmundson, Lowell. *Costa Rica Before Coffee: Society and Economy on the Eve of the Export Boom.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986.

Izquierdo Miller, Inés. "Las orishas en *Calypso*." *Espéculo. Revista de estudios literarios.* 31 (2007): 1-3.

Lobo, Tatiana. *Calypso.* San José: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2000.

Mackenbach, Werner. "Chocolate con crema en Parima Bay. Una novela costarricense cuenta del encanto perdido del Caribe." *Revista Comunicación* 12 (2002): 1-6.

Mosby, Dorothy. *Place, Language and Identity: Afro-Costa Rican Literature.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003.

Palmer, Steven and Iván Molina. *The Costa Rica Reader.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

Robinson, William I. *Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change and Globalization.* New York: Verso, 2003.

Rossi, Anacristina. *Limón Blues.* San José: Alfaguara, 2002.

Trigo, Abril. "Multiculturalismo, diversidad cultural y segmentación de mercados." *Identidad y multiculturalismo: retos de la sociedad global*. Barranquilla: Cátedra

Fulbright/Universidad del Norte, 2006. (1-26)

UNESCO. "Introducing UNESCO: Who We Are." *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*. 1 Jan 2009. Web. 10 March 2011.

UN General Assembly Resolution 64/169. *International Year for People of African Descent*. 19 Mar 2009. Web. 2 April 2011.

Valdo, Melissa. "Aprueban celebrar el Día de la Persona Negra y la Cultura Afrocostarricense por Ley." *La Nación: Edición Electrónica*. 28 Mar 2011. Web. 17 April 2011.

Valencia Chalá, Santiago. *El Negro en Centroamérica: Panamá, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Belice*. Quito, Ecuador: Centro Cultural Afro-Ecuatoriano Abya-Yala, 1986.

Vargas Porras, Edwin. "Celebran el día del negro." *Al Día*. 22 Aug 2010. Web. 15 Mar 2011.

Zalas Zamorra, Edwin. "Encuentros y desencuentros culturales en la novela *Calypso*." *VIII Congreso de Filología, Lingüística y Literatura Carmen Naranjo*. 26 Nov 1999. Web. 15 Mar 2011.

Žižek, Slavoj. "Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism." *New Left Review*, 1/225 (1997): 28-51.