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National Rhetoric and Suppression of Black Consciousness in Poems by Federico Escobar and Gaspar Octavio Hernández

Black writers in Panama during the period 1880–1920 promoted a nationalistic unity based on an imagined and deracialized cultural homogeneity. Instead of focusing on racial differences, writers such as Federico Escobar (1861–1912) and Gaspar Octavio Hernández (1893–1918) worked in the name of *panameñidad* [Panamanian cultural nationalism]. As Omi and Winant, and Kymlicka, have argued, cultural nationalism views the nation as a common culture with a shared sense of community, identity, and “peoplehood” (*Racial Formation* 40; *Politics* 243). This brand of Panamanian nationalism characterizes the writings of Afro-Hispanics who viewed themselves as an integral part of the Panamanian nation-state. Thus, these writers’ focus on *panameñidad* emphasized their cultural, national, and patriotic affiliation with Panama and dismissed the need for any emphasis on race. Because *panameñidad* was understood in terms of the customs, habits, religion, and language that Panamanians shared, there was no need to acknowledge racial differences. The Afro-Panamanian journalist and economist Armando Fortune noted the connection between *panameñidad* and culture: “La panameñidad es, ante todo y sobre todo, la peculiar calidad de la cultura panameña. En términos corrientes, es condición del alma, del espíritu; es complejo de sentimientos, ideas y actitudes” [Panamanian nationalism is, above and beyond all, the peculiar quality of Panamanian culture. In popular terms, it is

the condition of the soul, of the spirit; it is the complex of feelings, ideas, and attitudes] (294).

Panama's emphasis on culture and nation at the expense of race is consistent with that of other Latin American countries. Race and nation have remained inseparable concepts in Panama that have excluded people of color by reinforcing national discourses of homogeneity. Because the nation viewed Afro-Hispanics as culturally compatible with their Panamanian counterparts, their racial and ethnic differences were de-emphasized and their allegiance to the nation was stressed. Thus, throughout the period of nation building, black leaders and writers in Panama sacrificed a racialized discourse for a patriotic one. Leaders such as Juan B. Sosa (1870–1920), a prominent figure in Panama's Partido Liberal de Negros [Black Liberal Party], and Carlos A. Mendoza (1856–1916), Panama's first black president, “did not serve as forceful advocates for their own race but instead worked for national unity within the framework of *hispanidad*” (Szok 101).¹

The leaders' nationalistic politics resonate with that of other black trailblazers throughout the African Diaspora who set aside their personal or racial agenda in favor of the nation. For example, Martín Morúa Delgado, one of few Afro-Cuban elected officials at the turn of the twentieth century, spearheaded a law that declared “illegal any racially-defined political party,” thus putting an end to the race-based agenda of the political platform of the Partido Independiente de Color [Independent Colored Party] in 1910 (Fuente 210).²

The nationalistic agenda colored the writings of Afro-Hispanic poets as well. For example, the Panamanian Afro-Hispanic poet José Dolores Urriola (1834–84) participated in political movements during this period and served as the secretary of the civil jury in 1861 (Miró, *Cien años* 35). Urriola's poetry was both popular and satirical, and it characterized national concerns of the nineteenth century. Although known as “El Mulato,” Urriola wrote as a national or romantic poet by centering his discourse on current political problems and other nonracial material. Despite his African heritage, he chose to write for his country and avoid racial identification in his works. This nationalistic discourse of exclusion influenced writers of African and non-African descent in Panama from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century,

and it is evidenced in the writings of Escobar and Hernández, who wrote primarily as national poets.

Furthermore, poems by Escobar and Hernández form part of the emerging *negrista*, or poetic negrism, movement that piqued in the early decades of the twentieth century with the publication in 1930 of the Afro-Cuban Nicolás Guillén's *Motivos de son* [Son motifs]. The *negrista* movement flourished during the 1920s and 1930s in the Hispanic Caribbean and was a pseudoblack poetry that focused on physical elements of the black, sexual prowess, and propensity toward music (Cartey 67). *Negrista* poets such as Luis Palés Matos (1898–1957), Emilio Ballagas (1910–54), and Manuel del Cabral (1907–99) appropriated poetic devices such as onomatopoeia, repetition, rhythm, and rhyme to portray African culture. Although this poetry was concerned with the black image, it was primarily a movement of white intellectuals who objectified the black literary subject. As a result, the movement has often been viewed as the “exploitation of black culture by white writers” (Cartey 41). Poetic negrism writers portrayed blacks and African culture as sensual, exotic, and sexual, without any psychological profundity. The black literary image that materialized during this period was often superficial and rarely focused on the sociohistorical and socioeconomic factors that plagued black America, such as poverty, discrimination, and racism. Although poetic negrism is often associated with the stereotypical portrayal and sexual exploitation of the black (female) corpus by white male Caribbean writers (Palés Matos, Ballagas, del Cabral) on the one hand and the onomatopoeic verses of Guillén on the other, poetic negrism also colored the writings and intellectualism of late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black literary thinkers. These “pre-*negrista*” writers leaned toward national affiliation and the homogeneous projects of whitening and *mestizaje*. For example, the Afro-Colombian poet Candelario Obeso (1849–84) is considered a “legitimate precursor of black poetry,” yet he presented the nation as a utopia to fortify nationalistic pride.³ Thus, Hernández and Escobar's focus on nationalism at the expense of racial identity is a tenet found in other black literary thinkers and exemplifies pre-*negrista* literature and nation-building rhetoric.

The works of the Afro-Hispanic poets Federico Escobar and Gaspar Octavio Hernández illustrate the tension that race created

in writing during the formation of the new republic. These early writers were of colonial descent and represent Hispanicized blacks who were descendants of slaves. Their references to, or subordination of, their own blackness demonstrate the complex nature of being black and of writing during the height of the nationalistic movement. As writers of the new republic who were fighting for independence, they constantly felt the need to sacrifice their own ethnicity for the well-being of the nation. Although each dealt with blackness in his own way, their treatment of blackness, whether absent or visible, reveals much about being black during Panama's quest to establish itself as an independent nation. Jackson has analyzed Escobar and Hernández as poets who openly discussed their blackness or were escapists, respectively (*Black Writers in Latin America* 63); I illustrate that both were plagued by blackness and society's perception of race. Their works demonstrate the extent to which concepts of race and nation were intertwined during this period. Indeed, it was a constant struggle for these writers to affirm their blackness in their poetry and to maintain their national identity and acceptance by other Panamanians during the formation of the new republic.

"The Black Bard": Federico Escobar

Federico Escobar was committed to the national project but also expressed racial awareness in his writings. Escobar remains an important figure to study because he is the first writer of African ancestry in Panama to acknowledge his blackness and foreshadows the racial ambiguity inherent in the poetry of his contemporary Gaspar Hernández. Born José del Carmen de los Dolores Escobar, the poet was a carpenter by trade who worked twenty years for the French Canal (1880–99) (Miró, *Cien años* 64). Escobar lost his parents at a young age and sustained himself through his work as a carpenter, a profession he mastered under the tutelage of his uncle José Manuel Escobar. Escobar attained little formal education but managed to teach himself and become one of the leading poets of the nationalistic cause in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As one of the major poets of the era, he wrote a news-

paper column titled *Caricaturas a la pluma* [Written Caricatures], which detailed aspects of quotidian Panamanian society (Escobar, *Patrióticas* 21). Escobar published several works during his lifetime, including three volumes of poetry—*Hojas secas* [Dry Leaves] (1890), *Instantáneas* [Snapshots] (1907), and *Patrióticas* [Patriotic Poetry] (1909); two pamphlets, *El renacimiento de un pueblo: Oda a Cuba* [The Rebirth of a Town: Ode to Cuba] (1902) and *Oda al 28 de noviembre* [Ode to November 28] (1899); and two theatrical works, *La ley marcial* [Martial Law] (1885) and *La hija natural* [The Natural Daughter] (1886). These published pieces represent only a fraction of his collection, as a result of a fire that burned several of his unpublished poems in 1880. Despite his two race poems that will be analyzed at length later, the overarching themes of Escobar's poetry reflect an escalating national climate due to Panama's quest for independence from Gran Colombia. Highly patriotic poems such as "28 de noviembre" [November 28] and "3 de noviembre" [November 3] commemorate Panama's independence, whereas his race poems, "Nieblas" [Fog] and "Chispas" [Sparks], reveal an Afro-Hispanic identity mired in racial contradiction.

Patrióticas (1909) is composed of several poems dedicated to Panama's celebration of independence. "28 de noviembre" (1889) is a highly patriotic poem that recounts Panama's tumultuous history and pursuit of independence from Spain in 1821. The poet-speaker recalls the years of rule and domination by Spain. The verse "tres centurias gemiste bajo el yugo de la opresión ibera" [you moaned for three centuries under the burden of Iberian oppression] evokes Panama's years of suffering during the colonial period under Spanish rule, which made Panamanians invisible and "relegated them to oblivion" (Escobar, *Patrióticas* 11). Reflecting on the importance of Panama's independence, the poet-speaker recognizes the evils of colonial rule, including slavery and oppression. In the third section, he reminisces, "El saber escribir era un delito en el esclavo" [the ability to write was a crime for the slave] (Escobar, *Patrióticas* 15). However, the recognition of the evils of colonialism and slavery are subordinated to the poet-speaker's patriotism and are viewed as elements of the past, thus eliminating any discussions of racial problems in Panama.

Like many other romantics of the nineteenth century, Escobar spoke of nationalism and celebrated his country's succession from Spain. Furthermore, Escobar's veneration of Panama demonstrated a burgeoning nationalistic spirit, despite the country's political ties to Gran Colombia. The presence of the French in Panama heightened his nationalistic spirit in light of the French "invaders." In 1889, the year when Escobar wrote the poem, the French had descended upon Panama and had already begun construction of the Canal. As history informs us, their project would later be taken over by the United States and completed in 1914. Thus, the fifth section of the poem expresses Escobar's fear of the French presence and occupation of Panama. In commemoration of the anniversary of Panama's independence from Spain, the poet-speaker urges his fellow compatriots to "guardar la integridad de nuestro suelo [para] continuar la jornada del progreso" [keep the integrity of our land [in order to] continue the journey of progress] (Escobar, *Patrióticas* 19).

Escobar returns to the theme of national independence in "3 de noviembre," a patriotic poem that expresses joy over Panama's independence from Colombia in 1903. Composed of twenty-two stanzas, "3 de noviembre" not only announces Panama's independence from Colombia but also establishes the poet's relationship to his homeland. In the first stanza, he reaffirms his *panameñidad* by exclaiming:

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

[With what number and meter could I
praise you sweet and idealized country!
On your solemn day?
I can't find in this instant the
appropriate verse worthy of you
Oh, land of my parents, where
my sad birthplace was laid!] (Escobar, *Patrióticas* 20)