Sonja Stephenson Watson

The Politics of Race in Panama: Afro-Hispanic and West Indian Literary Discourses of Contention. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014. xii + 184 pp. (Cloth US\$ 74.95)

In *The Politics of Race in Panama*, Sonja Watson examines the literary contributions of key Panamanian writers of African descent from the nineteenth century forward within the context of the country's shifting racial politics and nationalistic agenda. Over five chronologically organized chapters bracketed by an introduction and conclusion, she tracks selected writers' relationships to discourses of blackness, nationalism, and national identity within the republic.

Watson argues that although blackness, in general, falls outside of the white and mestiza racial imaginary of Panama, "West Indians" experienced more explicit antiblack racism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than did their "Afro-Hispanic" peers, which impacted both the groups' relationship to each other and the ways race and nation figured in their writing. (In her book, "Afro-Hispanic" refers to African-descended populations who were forcibly brought to the isthmus as enslaved laborers in the sixteenth century and entered the twentieth century in Panama as Spanish-speaking, Catholic Panamanians, whereas "West Indian" refers to African descendants who came to Panama in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries predominantly as Protestant, English-speaking immigrant laborers for the Panama Railroad and Canal.) She argues that although both of these African-descended groups represent fragmented, hybrid cultural identities, Afro-Hispanic writers privileged national identity and nationalism over race whereas West Indian writers more often privileged their relationship to blackness over their relationship to national identity and nationalism.

Each chapter focuses on a significant writer or cluster of writers within a particular generation who engage the tangle of race and nation. The first two focus on writers with Afro-Hispanic perspectives; the remaining three consider successive West Indian generational perspectives. Chapter 1, "National Rhetoric and Suppression of Black Consciousness in Poems of Federico Escobar and Gaspar Octavio Hernández," concentrates on the poems of these two Afro-Hispanic authors during the nation-building period 1880–1920. She argues that at that time Afro-Hispanic writers focused more on national unity and *panameñidad* (Panamanian cultural nationalism) than on racial distinctions or discrimination. Still, discourses of black inclusion and exclusion in their work represent the fault lines between Afro-Hispanic and West Indian positionalities.

In Chapter 2, “Anti-West Indianism and Anti-Imperialism in Joaquín Belío’s Canal Zone Trilogy,” Watson argues that between 1940 and 1960 Afro-Hispanic writers used their work primarily to push back against U.S. imperialism and the internalization of U.S. Jim Crow, but often failed to critique Panamanian anti-West Indian racism. Chapter 3, “Revisiting the Canon: Historical Revisionism in Carlos ‘Cubena’ Guillermo Wilson’s Trilogy,” argues that the very reasons that Wilson has been excluded from the Panamanian literary canon represent key justifications for his inclusion—because his work forefronts West Indian characters from the perspective of a Panamanian West Indian writer; because it presents West Indian contributions to the Canal as central rather than marginal; and because it offers a sharp critique of Panama’s history of anti-West Indian racism.

In Chapter 4, “West Indian and Caribbean Consciousness in Works by Merva Lowe de Goodin, Gerardo Maloney, Carlos Guillermo Wilson, and Carlos E. Russell,” Watson attends to the ways these authors use their artistry in the service of social justice, engaging with the complexities of West Indian Panamanian identity from the 1970s to the present throughout various overlapping Black Diasporas. The final analytical chapter, “Beyond Blackness? New-Generation Afro-Panamanian Writers Melanie Taylor and Carlos Oriel Wynter Melo,” argues that writers born after 1970 such as Taylor and Wynter Melo heavily engage issues of modern identity politics from intersectional subject positions that include race, but do not necessarily make it their primary focus.

One of Watson’s key contributions is her focus on the multiple, overlapping diasporas that create several contemporary variants of black consciousness in Panama. Another is her attention to the impact that antiblack racism, particularly anti-West Indian black racism, had on late nineteenth- as well as twentieth-century black literary discourses. Her analysis gives particular attention to the work and perspective of West Indian Panamanian writers. At times, it is clear that this is to correct historical absences and to represent esteemed voices in black literary movements in Panama. Still, I was left wondering: Did Afro-Hispanic writers stop publishing notable works that engaged with nation and race after the 1960s or were West Indian Panamanian voices privileged because they were more vocal in debates over black national being and belonging?

Although I yearned at times for a bit more sociohistorical precision, I would recommend the text to readers interested in learning about key African-descended Panamanian literary figures from the nineteenth century forward and the dynamic discourses of race and nation that influenced their literary production. *The Politics of Race in Panama* makes an important contribution to Panamanian, Caribbean, Latin American, and black Diaspora literary history and criticism.

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