

Homenaje a Cubena

Carlos “Cubena” Guillermo Wilson was one of the most important Panamanian writers of the 20th and 21st century. Cubena, as he was known in literary circles and amongst friends, passed on June 5, 2016. He is an important literary figure in Panama because his writings redeem the literary image of the West Indian who was excluded from the Panamanian nation-building project. Wilson was committed to telling the untold story, revising history, and changing the perception of the West Indian portrayed in Panamanian literature. Thus, he challenged national myths propagated during early twentieth-century Panama by presenting the West Indian as the central protagonist. In turn, he re-signified the national myth of Panama as Hispanic, Catholic, and Spanish-speaking. Wilson’s primary mission to write was to bring awareness to the historical and cultural contributions of afro-descendants in Panama because they have been excluded from literary and historical texts; an oversight that he made known in his review essay “Sinopsis de la poesía afro-panameña” (“Sinopsis of Afro-Panamanian Poetry”). Wilson observed, “It draws attention to the fact that official texts about Panamanian history omit the presence and above all the important contribution of people of African descent in Panama” (“Llama la atención el hecho de que textos oficiales de la historia de Panamá hagan ocaso omiso de la presencia y sobre todo, del importante aporte de la gente de ascendencia Africana en Panamá” 14). Wilson’s novels, short stories, and poems aimed to correct this historical omission and informed us about the Afro-Panamanian experience and what it means to be black in a nation that is constructed around whiteness and by extension, non-blackness. His works also exemplify what it means to be black and English-speaking in a nation of Spanish speakers. Finally, his works provide historical information

on Panamanians and West Indians and African descendants throughout the Diaspora. The content of his writings transmit knowledge about history, literature, culture, politics, and the marginalization of blacks in the New World and specifically in Panama where color, complexion, and culture are complex. In effect, Wilson’s works bring to light the “darker” elements of Panamanian history by focusing on lesser known historical facts that pertain to those of African ancestry on the Isthmus. Most importantly, Cubena’s works give a voice to the Panamanian West Indian who has been silenced since he/she ventured across the Atlantic over a century ago. This is Cubena’s legacy.

Despite his international success as a black writer, Cubena’s works have not been well received in Panama and only recently have his works been included in Panamanian literary anthologies. I surveyed several literary anthologies published about Panamanian and Central American writers between 2000-2010 and Cubena was not published in many of them. He was not a part of *Cuentos centroamericanos* (Central American Short Stories 2000), *Diccionario de la literatura panameña* (Dictionary of Panamanian Literature 2002), *Antología de escritores del istmo centroamericano* (Anthology of Writers from the Central American Isthmus 2003), or the *Diccionario de la literatura centroamericana* (Dictionary of Central American Literature 2007). The *Diccionario de la literatura panameña* is a compilation of Panama’s most distinguished writers from the colonial period until 2002. Cubena’s exclusion from the *Diccionario* is surprising because it incorporates other black Panamanian writers such as Gaspar Hernández, Federico Escobar, Joaquín Beleño, Gerardo Maloney, and Carlos Oriel Wynter Melo. Published a year before Panama’s centennial anniversary, the editors noted that the purpose of the anthology was to “fortify national identity” (“fortalecer la identidad

nacional”) (García de Paredes and Segura Jiménez 7). I thought initially Wilson’s exclusion was perhaps because he has lived permanently in the United States since the fifties. The anthologists acknowledged however that they also included international authors who treat Panamanian themes in their literary works (7). In their words, these writers who reside outside of Panama were included because they “fictionalize essential aspects of contemporary Panamanian reality” (“ficcionalizaron aspectos esenciales de la realidad panameña contemporánea” (7). These comments beg one to question whether Wilson was excluded because his works do not treat Panamanian reality or at least a reality that many Panamanians want to acknowledge.

Enrique Jaramillo Levy, one of Panama’s most distinguished short story writers and literary critics, does not include Wilson in his 1980 anthology *Poesía Panameña Contemporánea* (1929-1979) (Contemporary Panamanian Poetry) which is surprising since his poems had been recently published in 1977. Jaramillo Levy also does not include Wilson’s short stories in his anthology *Panamá Cuenta: Cuentistas del Centenario* (Panama tells Short Stories: Centennial Short Story Writers 1851-2003), an anthology published in 2003 which includes sixty Panamanian short story writers. In the introduction, Jaramillo Levy lists several short story writers who have received international recognition for their work but he fails to include Wilson which is odd considering the reception that he has received abroad. In the notes portion of his introduction, Jaramillo Levy includes Wilson as one of many writers who “[a]lso have published short story books” (“[t]ambién han publicado libros de cuento”” Panamá Cuenta 27). Amongst Wilson’s published short story collections, he lists *Cuentos del negro Cubena: Pensamiento Afro-Panameño* but not *Los mosquitos de orixá Changó* (The Mosquitoes of the Orisha Chango) which was published in 2000. Unless a reader, or an eager graduate student as I once was, was actually looking for Wilson’s name, he/she would most certainly not find it. Furthermore, his inclusion of Wilson’s works in the notes portion signifies that he is not one of the central short story writers to be studied. However, Jaramillo Levy does include Wilson in his short story anthology *Sueño compartido: Compilación histórica de cuentistas panameños* (Shared Dream: Historical Compilation of Panamanian Short Story Writers) (1892-2004)

published in 2005. He introduces Wilson’s short story “El bombero” (“The Fireman”) which deals with racial prejudice in the United States during the turbulent sixties by the Klu Klux Klan. It is interesting that he includes a short story that deals with racial prejudice outside of Panama. The addition of “El bombero” as opposed to some of Wilson’s other stories such as “El niño de harina” (“The Flour Boy”) which deals with racism in Latin America, merely reinforces the inexistence of racial prejudice in Panama. However, even with Jaramillo Levy’s reference, Wilson still has not received the recognition that he deserves in his native Panama by literary critics. Much like other Afro-Hispanic writers, Cubena has gained more recognition outside of his patria than in his homeland.

In the United States, Cubena’s works have appeared in the Afro-Hispanic anthologies *Afro-Hispanic Literature: an Anthology of Hispanic Writers of African Ancestry* (1991) and *An English Anthology of Afro-Hispanic Writers of the Twentieth Century* (1995). Several monographs, articles, and dissertations have been written about Wilson’s works. However, the initial studies by Richard Jackson and Ian Smart helped congeal Wilson’s canonical status as a must read by any scholar of Afro-Hispanic studies. Jackson’s article about Cubena’s works in *Black Writers in Latin America* published two years after the appearance of his collection of poetry and short stories in 1979, made everyone want to read the works of the new writer who professed a “West Indian rage” as Jackson characterized him. Five years later, Smart’s groundbreaking text *Central American Writers of West Indian Origin* solidified Wilson as a West Indian who writes in Spanish ranking him along with Costa Rican Quince Duncan and his compatriot Panamanian West Indian Gerardo Maloney. Nearly two decades after his initial publication on Cubena, Jackson sealed the author’s canonical status by including him in *Black Writers and the Hispanic Canon* (1997) which argues why fifteen writers of African descent should be a part of the Hispanic canon. Jackson’s criteria for incorporating these writers into the Hispanic canon, is both informative and descriptive. He notes, “I am only concerned, as in my previous work, with what Hispanic literature-and in particular, Black Hispanic literature-tells us about Blacks, about how we should treat others, and about how it can help us live our lives” (Black Writers and

the Hispanic Canon xiii). In other words, Wilson was included for what he could inform us about what it means to be black and West Indian in Panama. Several other monographs have conveyed Wilson's importance in the field of Afro-Hispanic studies including: Denouncement and Reaffirmation of the Afro-Hispanic Identity in *Carlos Guillermo Wilson's Works* (Birmingham-Pokorny 1993), *Central American Writers of West Indian Origin: A New Hispanic Literature* (Smart 1984), and *In Search of the Fathers: The Poetics of Disalienation in the Narrative of Two Contemporary Afro-Hispanic Writers* (Zoggyie 2003). The doctoral dissertation, "The Afro-Caribbean Novels of Resistance of Alejo Carpentier, Quince Duncan, Carlos Guillermo Wilson, and Manuel Zapata Olivella," by Thomas Wayne Edison read Wilson's works along with other Afro-Hispanic novelists. My own manuscript, *The Politics of Race in Panama: Afro-Hispanic and West Indian Literary Discourses of Contention* (2014), incorporates his works into the Afro-Panamanian literary continuum and argues why Cubena merits entry into the canon. Finally, his works are offered in translation; Ian Smart's translation of *Cuentos del negro Cubena: Pensamiento Afro-Panameño as Short Stories by Cubena* (1987) assures that his poems will be read by the English-speaking public. Needless to say, his works are well respected in the field of Afro-Hispanic studies among academics outside of his native Panama.

Cubena's absence from literary anthologies is important because they "create and reform canons, establish literary reputations and help institutionalize the national culture, which they reflect" (Mujica 203-204). Wilson's sharp criticism of Panama for its discrimination of West Indians and his "unapologetic didacticism" in the words of Richard Jackson clearly contributed to his lack of inclusion (*Black Writers and the Hispanic Canon* 79). Cubena's exclusion from Latin American literary canons is similar to that of other Afro-Hispanic writers in their native countries. Several studies have noted that Nicomedes Santa Cruz's exclusion from the Peruvian literary canon is race-based and reflects the country's unwillingness to confront racial issues and its own black population (Ojeda 11; *Black Writers and the Hispanic Canon* Jackson 100). I contend that Wilson's omission from the Panamanian literary canon is because his texts reveal decades of discrimination towards afro-descendants and West Indians in Panama who helped shaped the

nation pre- and post-emancipation.

Cubena's corpus of writings is important because as Richard Jackson informed us some time ago, "[t]he very discovery of a black text makes it a readable item, and every critical reading, whether intentionally or not, is a celebration of the text's existence" (*Black Writers and the Hispanic Canon* 5). Thus, Wilson's works merit entry into the canon for not only how they are written but also for what they tell us about Afro-Panamanians. Brown asserts that a "text that is valued for its informative content can... transmit knowledge about culture, history, the human experience, politics, ethics, and/or marginalized groups and minorities" and I agree (149).

For most of his literary career, which spans 1977 to 2005, Cubena was not recognized by the Panamanian nation-state until 2002. He received two Panamanian national awards: the first was the Vasco Núñez de Balboa National Medal presented by former President Mireya Moscoso in recognition of his national and international merit as an educator and the second was awarded by the National Committee for the 100th Anniversary of the country. Cubena finally received the recognition that he deserved. Que en paz descanse.

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