

# Tribute to the “Last Buffalo”: Panamanian West Indian Writer Dr. Carlos E. Russell (1934-2018)

Sonja Stephenson Watson • University of Texas at Arlington

I had the pleasure of meeting Dr. Carlos E. Russell in 2010 at the College Language Association Conference, held in New York, the author’s home away from his native Panama. I organized a special panel on Russell’s scholarship on West-Indian literature in Panama. During the visit, I also had the opportunity to interview Russell for a piece that would be published in *Istmo. Revista virtual de estudios literarios y culturales centroamericanos*. The interview was arranged and filmed by Panamanian scholar Luis Pulido Ritter who also served on the panel. The interview was transformational for my research on Panama and would shape the chapter that I included in my then forthcoming manuscript (*The Politics of Race in Panama: Afro-Hispanic and West Indian Literary Discourses of Contention* University Press of Florida, 2014, 2017). During our one-hour conversation, it became very clear that the generational shift amongst blacks in Panama and between *negros coloniales* and *negros antillanos* was indeed real and shaped by ideological differences toward language, culture, and identity.

Since that 2010 interview, Russell and I had the opportunity to form an intellectual bond based on our shared love of black Panama and the African Diaspora. I looked forward to receiving his sometimes weekly or monthly updates that included articles or essays that he had written about pertinent issues in Panama and the larger African Diaspora. My final visit with Russell was in 2017, when I had the opportunity to chat with him in Panama about politics, literature, and of course, black identity. The words that follow pay homage to him for his scholarship and contribution to Afro-Diasporic letters as a scholar, poet, and essayist.

Russell was a poet and essayist who lived in the United States and represents many other Panamanian nationals who migrated there during the second half of the twentieth century for economic advancement. Russell dedicated his life to the preservation of Panamanian West Indian culture, language, and heritage through his literature and activism and wrote primarily in English to maintain the Anglophone Caribbean culture in Panama. His formation in the United States is just as important as his upbringing in Panama. Russell was educated at one of Panama’s most prestigious schools, the National Institute, that has educated future

dignitaries, military personnel, and the like. At the Institute, he was instructed on how to be Panamanian and not black West Indian. Stereotypes abounded in the Institute where a racist teacher acknowledged how surprised she was that a black West Indian could write so well in Spanish. This stifled his literary creation in Spanish because the teacher told him bluntly, “Tú no pudiste saber escrito este cuento... porque tú eres jamaquino...” Watson “Entrevista con Russell”). The effects were devastating. Russell acknowledged the impact of the teacher’s statements, “Yo nunca más podía escribir ningún artículo o cuento literario en español porque yo no puedo según ella...” (Watson “Entrevista con Russell”). Although Russell wrote equally in Spanish and English, most of his works are written in English to challenge the official discourse of anti-West Indian sentiment that this teacher and others espoused. Russell’s fears as a young boy of racism, discrimination, and oppression were so profound that he acknowledged that he did not dare to ask a Panamanian girl out on a date because he was West Indian and black. His background in Panamanian schools contrasted with that at home where his stepfather exposed him to the literary works of Montesquieu and Rousseau. By contrast, it was the intellectual and political environment in New York where he became entrenched in the civil rights movement which gave rise to his “defense and promotion of Caribbean culture in Panama” (Pulido Ritter “Entrevista con Carlos Russell” 3). He became the editor of the New York newspaper the *Liberator*, a pan-africanist, socialist, and Diasporic pamphlet that promoted the Black Panther movement (Pulido Ritter “Entrevista con Carlos Russell” 2). Russell acknowledged the influence of the United States and these movements on his black intellectualism, consciousness, and formation in the following recollection. “Leaving Panama, maturing here. I define myself as an African whose relatives were born in the Caribbean but who became a man in the streets of Brooklyn and the streets of Chicago because in that environment I had the opportunity to exchange ideas to see to know how that phase of European thought affects someone who is black” (“Saliendo de Panamá madurándome acá. Yo me defino como africano cuyos parientes nacieron en el Caribe pero quien se hizo hombre en las calles de Brooklyn

y en las calles de Chicago porque en ese ambiente yo tuve la oportunidad de intercambiar ideas ver saber como esa fase del pensamiento europeo afecta a uno que es negro” Watson “Entrevista con Russell”). It is no surprise that Russell’s poetry and prose deal with the question of identity and the reconciliation of the Panamanian West Indian’s cultural, linguistic, and ethnic ties to Africa, the Caribbean, and Panama. His collection of poetry includes *Miss Anna’s Son Remembers* (1976), *An Old Woman Remembers* (1995), and *Remembranzas y lágrimas* (*Memories and Tears* 2001). *Remembranzas y lágrimas* is a compilation of poems in Spanish and English, many of them reproduced from his 1976 collection *Miss Anna’s Son Remembers*. Both *Miss Anna’s Son Remembers* (1976) and *Remembranzas y lágrimas* (2001) are bilingual tributes to Panamanian West -Indian immigrants who paved the way for present generations to succeed. Russell’s essays deal specifically with identity issues of the West Indian population in Panama and abroad and the problematic of the Caribbean Diaspora figure.

Of most interest to me as a scholar is Russell’s 2003 book-length manuscript, *The Last Buffalo: ‘Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species?’* *The Last Buffalo* yearns to maintain the Anglophone Caribbean in Panama. Russell represents many other Panamanian nationals who migrated to the United States during the second half of the 20th century for economic advancement. Although he lived in the United States, Russell spent the last years of his life in Panama and dedicated his work to the preservation of Panamanian West Indian culture, language, and

heritage through his literature and political activism. His book-length essay (*The Last Buffalo*) informs us about the construction of identity and how various ethnic groups appropriate hybrid political identities that are often rooted in homogeneous discourses of whiteness.

In *The Last Buffalo*, Russell ponders the possibility of an eventual loss of Caribbean culture among the present generation of Panamanian West Indians and identifies his fear that the Panamanian of Anglophone Caribbean ancestry is in danger of extinction. Russell’s angst responds to decades of West Indian exclusion from the Panamanian nation-state and the fear that the current generation of Panamanian West Indians will assimilate and no longer speak English, the language of their Anglophone Caribbean ancestors. *The Last Buffalo* expresses concern over the loss of Caribbean identity in the current generations of Panamanians of West Indian ancestry. Russell theorizes that the loss of English among Anglophone Caribbeans, the disconnect with their native homeland of Jamaica and/or Barbados, the exclusive use of Spanish, and the Caribbean’s assimilation into Panamanian culture and society, all denote a decline in the efficacy of Panamanian West Indian culture. Russell’s doubts about the preservation of Caribbean culture and heritage in Panama lead him to ponder the question: ‘Where do we, as a Caribbean people, fit within the social and political configuration of the Republic of Panama?’(20). In effect, according to Russell, West Indians are analogous to the last buffalo that is in danger of extinction. As one of the last buffalos, Dr. Russell will be missed. Que en paz descanse.

---

## WORKS CITED

- Pulido Ritter, Luis. “Entrevista con Carlos E. Russell. Introducción.” *Istmo: Revista virtual de estudios literarios y culturales centroamericanos* (2010): 1-3.
- Russell, Carlos. *The Last Buffalo: ‘Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species?’*, Conquering Books, Charlotte, NC, 2003.
- Watson, Sonja Stephenson. “‘Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species?’: Critical Literary Debates on Panamanian Blackness in the Works of Carlos Wilson, Gerardo Maloney, and Carlos Russell” *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* (2009): 231-254.
- . “Entrevista con Carlos Russell.” *Istmo: Revista virtual de estudios literarios y culturales centroamericanos* (2010).

---

## ENDNOTES

- \* Russell is Professor Emeritus of the City University of New York-Brooklyn College, has taught classes on Latin-American/African culture and politics, and African-American literature, and has served as Dean of the School of Contemporary Studies of Brooklyn College, a program

which he designed and established. Russell has also served as acting director of the Division of International and Urban Affairs at Medgar Evers College, the City University of New York, and has been associate editor at the *Amsterdam News* and the *Liberator* magazine.