The Central American Caribbean: Rethinking Regional and National Imaginaries

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The project that I will describe here is a major part of a larger project on Central American Culture and Cultural Policy. Central America has undergone significant transformations since the peace accords in the early 1990s. Among those transformations is an increasing salience of the Caribbean, to the degree that it puts into question the national and regional imaginaries (or imagined communities, in Benedict Anderson’s terms) that prevailed before.

It used to be (and in most cases continues be) that when literary, cultural and political analysts thought of Central America, they envisaged a mestizo/indigenous cultural formation, and a revolutionary imaginary. Most anthropological work falls into the first category, and most literary analysis of the 1980s and early 1990s into the second. An example of the latter is John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman’s Literature and politics in the Central American revolutions (1990). Postcolonial and subaltern studies gave a major tonality to the first discourse; post-Althusserian or Lacanian theories of hegemony and the national-popular helped shape the latter. A look at Central American literary and cultural studies of the 1980s and early 1990s, and even more so before that period, will show few if any references to the Garífuna1 and Miskito peoples of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, and if they do, they are characterized in opposition to national and revolutionary goals, as in the case of the Miskitos of Nicaragua, who fought the Sandinista attempt to rein them into a national-popular formation that they did not feel they belonged to. Nor were there references to the Afro-Costa Ricans of Limón, or the Congos of Portobelo and Colón, Panamá. What was understood to be Central America was largely shaped by writers and intellectuals from or working on Pacific and Central Valleys of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

The point I will elaborate in the conclusion is that a national or regional imaginary has to achieve receptivity within a set of historical circumstances that articulate discursively. The historical conjuncture in which national-popular imaginaries emerged generally did not make reference to translocal migrations, mass mediated music, youth gangs, narcotraffic, remittances, neoliberal policies, free trade agreements, regional integration, cultural diversity, biodiversity, tourism, and sustainable development, to mention just a few of the discourses that provide the woof and warp in which any imaginary today will take shape and become compelling (or not). In this discursive mesh, the criollo-mestizo formation that provided the cultural matrix for hegemonic identity from independence to the 1960s is no longer viable. At the same time as this mesh makes the Caribbean salient and the new Central American imaginary consolidates, we see a new national-popular socialism of the 21st century in South America, the Alternativa Bolivariana de las Américas (ALBA), to which Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega subscribed in January 2007, and recently, now deposed Honduran president Manuel Zelaya (in August 2008).2

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1 The Garífuna people are descendants of African slaves shipwrecked on the island of St. Vincent in 1735 and who mixed with the Arawak and Carib peoples on the island, eventually integrating with the residents and forming a new hybrid language (most also speak English and Spanish). They resisted all European colonizers but eventually surrendered to the British, who transported between 2,500 and 5,000 “Black Caribs” (different sources vary on the number) to the Honduran coast about 1,000 miles to the west. From there, they spread along the coast westward to Guatemala and north to Belize and southward to Nicaragua. Traditionally making a livelihood from fishing and subsistence agriculture, the Garífuna are among the poorest inhabitants of the Isthmus. With the emergence of tourism as a major economic strategy of the governments of the countries in which they live, Garífuna culture is undergoing change and appropriation, and many Garífuna have migrated, especially to the US, where there are significant communities in New York, Los Angeles and Miami. (See Solien González 1988).

2 Yet another Central American imaginary seems to be emerging: a Janus-faced appeal to the USA and Venezuela’s Chávez. While Ortega criticizes the free trade agreement with the USA, Central America and the Dominican Republic (CAFTA-DR), he nevertheless stated that he will seek to renegotiate it to gain some leverage, and that he will promote private and foreign investment, including tourism in the Caribbean coastal areas. It is too early to say, but he may toe the same pragmatic line that led him to negotiate alliances with...
Given the scope of this essay, let me simply state, without historical elaboration, that the Caribbean was left out of the Central American imaginary for three main reasons: (1) historically it was physically inhospitable and insalubrious (malaria) and of difficult access from the Pacific and Central areas; (2) it was developed for export agriculture (principally bananas as of the 1870s) by foreign powers (the English and the North Americans), who had also built the railroads in the region, and subsequently the Panama Canal, to provide access to Europe and the USA for coffee exports; and (3) the majority of the labor brought for that purpose was non-Hispanic and non-mestizo: principally Afro-Antilleans, mostly from Jamaica, as well as Chinese and Indians, with significant numbers of Italians, Arabs, English, and Germans who sought to strike it rich.

Coffee production dominated the Pacific and Central highlands, while banana production was concentrated in the Caribbean coast in Honduras, Costa Rica and Panama (Acuña Ortega 1993). The autonomy of the new republics was threatened by imperial aspirations, such as those of the filibusterer William Walker, who declared himself military commander and president of Nicaragua from 1856-57, and those of the British, who set up colonies in what is now Belize and the Bay Islands off the coast of Honduras, and along the Miskito Coast of Nicaragua, including the mouth of the San Juan River, where the USA sought to build a canal. This split between Pacific and Caribbean is a major reason why there is no Central American version of Fernando Ortiz’s *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940). Had the elites who wrote history and published newspapers interacted more with the Caribbean, there might have been a “Contrapunteo costarricense del café y el banano”, with many of the same contrasts and contradictions pointed out by Ortiz in Cuba: white coffee producers, occupying small landholdings, promoting Liberal democracy, on the one hand, and large foreign corporations exploiting largely black labor on large banana plantations on the other. As historian Pérez Brignoli writes,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Works that represent banana production and Afro-Central American workers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belize</td>
<td>Brief period of banana production before WWI and then again in the 1990</td>
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<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>Carlos Luis Fallas, <em>Mamita Yunai</em> (1941)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Carmen Lyra, <em>Bananos y hombres</em> (1931)</td>
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<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>Not a banana producer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Miguel Angel Asturias, <em>Viento fuerte</em> (1950)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Miguel Angel Asturias, <em>El papa verde</em> (1954)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Miguel Angel Asturias, <em>Los ojos de los enterrados</em> (1960)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>Ramón Amaya Amador, <em>Prisión verde</em> (1950)</td>
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<td>Ramón Amaya Amador, <em>Rieles gringos y destacamento rojo</em> (1967)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Paqa Navas de Miralda, <em>Barro</em> (1951)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Marcos Carías Reyes, <em>Trópico</em> (1971)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>Emilio Quintana, <em>Bananos. La vida de los peones de la yunai</em> (1942)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>José Román, <em>Cosmapa</em> (1944)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>Joaquín Beleño, <em>Flor de banana</em> (1970)</td>
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Such an “internal perspective” is a problematic concept; obviously, one must ask for whom it is “internal”.

Literary and cultural critics have observed that the cultural practices of the Caribbean were not incorporated into Central American public spheres, without exoticizing and stereotyping them, until the 1990s (Mackenbach 2002; Duncan 1975), when writers who are not black adopted points of view from within Afro-Caribbean culture.3 Afro-Central Americans appeared in what we might call “Banana Republic” novels that criticized the conditions imposed by the United Fruit Company and other transnational companies, and the plight and struggle of the workers, among them Afro-Caribbeans (Grinberg Pla and Mackenbach 2006; Mackenbach 2006).

3 Such an “internal perspective” is a problematic concept; obviously, one must ask for whom it is “internal”.

former Somocists, Contras, and former president Arnoldo Alemán, who has been prosecuted for corruption. And Zelaya, in turn, has asked the USA for assistance – particularly the suspension of military and other forms of aid to the *de facto* government installed by *coup d’etat*— at the same time that he courts Ortega’s and Chávez’s hospitality and support.
Among the most interesting is *Mamita Yunai* (1941) by Costa Rican labor activist Carlos Luis Fallas, who went to work for United Fruit in Limón and reacted to extreme exploitation by organizing strikes. *Mamita Yunai*, an ironic reference to the United Fruit Company that was anything but motherly, has a testimonial character, like many other social realist novels of the period, particularly with respect to the strike of 1934. And Fallas’ solidarity with his fellow workers of all races compensates, in Afro-Costa Rican intellectual Quince Duncan’s view, for the lack of knowledge of the history and culture of the black population of Limón (1975:14). Other social realist novels not only lacked knowledge of the Afro-Central Americans but also reflected the racism of the (1975:14). Other social realist novels not only lacked knowledge of the Afro-Central Americans but also reflected the racism of the lettrados from Pacific and Central Valleys, as in Marco Carías Reyes’ *Trópico or Barro* by Paca Navas de Miralda, in which Garífunas appear as licentious, promiscuous, savage, superstitious and lazy.

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<th>Country</th>
<th>Works that represent the Caribbean from an “internal” perspective</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Quince Duncan, <em>Una canción en la madrugada</em> (1970)</td>
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<td>Quince Duncan, <em>La rebelión pocomía y otros relatos</em> (1974)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Quince Duncan, <em>Un señor de chocolate</em> (1997)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Political and cultural debates center on indigenous peoples</td>
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<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>Rafael Ruiloba, <em>Vienen de Panamá</em> (1991)</td>
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With the emergence of black writers like Quince Duncan, according to critic Mackenbach (2002), an internal perspective was developed. Mackenbach also attributes this internality to non-black writers in the 1990s whose narrators communicate and convey the action and thoughts of the characters within the perspective and consciousness of their black characters. They seek to recreate and represent a Caribbean world that was missing in their national literature.

Although there are precedents, the 1990s are replete with works that fill out the imagined world of the Central American Caribbean. Some are historical novels, like Anacristina Rossi’s *Limón Blues* (2002) and Yazmín Ross’ *La flota negra* (2000), both of which focus on Marcus Garvey’s life in Puerto Limón and the impact of the Universal Negro Improvement Association UNIA on the larger circum Caribbean. Two other quasi-historical novels are David Ruiz Puga’s *Got seif de Cuin!* (1995), which humorously narrates the evolution of Belize from its status as a colony – British Honduras – in the 19th century to its independence in 1981. Part of the humor in this novel derives from the astonished reaction of the people to the frequency of regime changes, shifts in national boundaries, and the arrival of foreigners. The result is a babelic mix of languages that confuses everyone, including the ruler of the moment. Several critics have pointed to the Macondo-like mix of everyday humor and modernity, leading to a clash of perspectives (for example, of indigenous customs and European legality), which is narrated with much irony by Ruiz Puga.

Another quasi-historical novel that has a Macondo-like flavor is Tatiana Lobo’s *Calypso* (1996). The family resemblance has less to do with the everyday humor, as in *Got seif de Cuin!* than with the founding of a new town, Parima Bay, in the Caribbean province of Limón, Costa Rica, and the evolution of that town in connection with the founder’s increasingly lucrative enterprises and his repeated fallings-in-love with a lineage of beautiful black women. Lorenzo Parima, a homely criollo from the interior of the country, moves to the coast and becomes fast friends with Alphæus Robinson, aka Plantintáh (Jamaican for plantain tart), for which he has a sweet tooth. When Plantintáh introduces Lorenzo to his girlfriend Amanda, he falls head over heels in love and plots to kill Plantintáh so he can become his successor. The murder, once carried out under the pretence of an accidental shooting, allows Lorenzo to begin to court Amanda. She takes up with another Jamaican, and Lorenzo suspects that Plantintáh’s ghost is responsible for thwarting his plans. A few years later he is smitten...
again by Amanda’s and Plantintáh’s daughter Eudora, and after a failed union with her, years later he falls yet again for Eudora’s daughter Matilda. All the while the town grows, largely because of Lorenzo’s business dealings, many of them corrupt. As the town enters modernity, the magical aspects, represented by pocomía and African lore, seem to lose their power, until the end when a tsunami-like convulsion of the sea and the atmosphere literally swallows Lorenzo’s shop, as Matilda dances “una voluptuosa liturgia, un llamado ferviente a otra dimensión” (Lobo 1996:267). The novel thus bears out the two epigraphs: Matilda embodies the power of seduction of the mythical Calypso, from the Odyssey; and she also refers to the call and response of the musical genre calypso which originates in “los informativos clandestinos que los esclavos solían cantar y bailar, para comunicarse las noticias del día y las maldades del amo” (1996:9).

The use of Afro-Caribbean magic and lore is suggestive, and provides a running commentary on the changes that the coastal town undergoes. The United Fruit Company relocates banana production to the Pacific and cacao production is ruined by a plague. And yet another plague, tourism, takes its place as a source of wealth for Lorenzo and land speculators. Soon Americans arrive and build hotels, gated communities and malls. The erosion of the environment and the harnessing of the local cultural practices for exotica-seeking tourists alter the faces of the mythical Calypso, from the Odyssey; and she also refers to the call and response of the musical genre calypso which originates in “los informativos clandestinos que los esclavos solían cantar y bailar, para comunicarse las noticias del día y las maldades del amo” (1996:9).

The film Caribe (2004), directed by Esteban Ramírez and scripted by poet and actress Ana Istarú, portrays Costa Rica’s multicultural Caribbean coast population in turmoil when an American oil company begins drilling and buying off local businessmen. Concerns about environmental damage are countered by the need for jobs. The protagonist, biologist Vicente Vallejo, played by Jorge Perugorria (also protagonist in Cuban filmmaker Gutiérrez Alea’s “Fresa y chocolate”), is recruited by the company to sell the plan, and grapples with his social conscience while engaging in a dangerous affair with the half-sister (played by Cuca Escribano) of his wife (played by Maya Zapatá). Here sustainable development is portrayed as a bona fide goal of the fishermen, union leaders and environmentalists. In both, La loca de Gandoca and Caribe, the narratives are based on real events, and were seen as a means of intervening in public spheres to keep Costa Rica’s claims to sustainable development from degenerating into sheer hype.

Of all the literary works that I have reviewed for this project, the most compelling are the two meticulously researched historical novels, Limón Blues by Anacristina Rossi and La flota negra by Yazmín Ross. Both deal with Marcus Garvey’s sojourns and activism in Limón. The first conveys the action through the perspective of Orlandus Robinson, a young man who, like Garvey, migrated to Limón to find work around 1910, and his lover Irene Barrett, a Dominican-Jamaican mulata who grew up in Cuba. Garvey, who worked briefly as a United Fruit Company timekeeper and then moved on to edit newspapers serving the Jamaican-derived Afro-Limonense community, is taken with Orlandus’ intelligence and skills and recruits him to work for UNIA and his other pet project The Black Star Line of Steamships which are to return the African Diaspora to the homeland. This device enables the narrator to follow the characters throughout the Caribbean and Harlem, where a myriad of historical characters like W.E.B. DuBois, Bessie Smith, Nancy Cunard, and others make cameo appearances. The novel criticizes Costa Ricans’ narrow-mindedness regarding Afro-Caribbeans and portrays Limón’s intellectuals, like Samuel Charles Nation, editor of the Limón Times, as activists who seek to empower their community and gain citizen rights.

Yazmín Ross’ novel focuses on Garvey himself and instead of putting the documentary texts in the mouth of characters, cites them directly in the
nove. Yet it is as much a piece of fiction as *Limón Blues.* Ross gives (or constructs) insights into Garvey’s consciousness and conscience, examines his grand aspirations as well as his vulnerabilities, his vanity and his affections. She also gives greater play to Garvey’s life in Harlem, and his Black Star Line, which is what seems to have animated the hopes of the African Diaspora throughout the Americas. Ross portrays these hopes as a necessary illusion, a goal that remains despite the suspicion that it would fail. And despite the many conspiracies to trip him up, such as those of J. Edgar Hoover, whose dialogue is taken directly from documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act FOIA, Garvey attracts and ever greater following. As in Rossi’s novel, we also see important historical characters such as W.E.B. DuBois, Claude McKay, James Van der Zee, Josephine Baker, Madam C.J. Walker, Langston Hughes, and others, interacting with Garvey. But ultimately, it is the impact on Limón itself that stands out.

This impact is emphasized even more in the documentary film *El barco prometido* (2000), directed by Luciano Capelli and scripted by Ross. The informants who appear every now and then in the novel, puncturing the past-tense diegesis, become the protagonists of the film. And we understand with greater clarity that the steamships, the UNIA bonds, and the return to Africa are but the future of an illusion. In the book by that title, Sigmund Freud (1989) explains that what is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes for value. In this sense, Garvey is portrayed in the novel as a kind of secular priest or even a messiah (that is why his middle name is Moziah, a combination of Moses and Messiah), for, according to Freud, “it is only through the influence of individuals who can set an example and whom masses recognize as their leaders that they can be induced to perform the work and undergo the renunciations on which the existence of civilization depends.” (Freud 1989:8)

There are many other novels that I could review here, but I just want to give a sense of the variety of works that project an imaginary of the Central American Caribbean. Now I would like to present a series of questions that my project will have to take into consideration.

The first consideration has to do with the notion of region. Obviously, I have brought two regions together: Central America, on the one hand, and the Caribbean, on the other. Like nations, regions are historical and discursive constructs. The physical reality does not determine the discursive constructs. The physical reality does not determine the discourse. If that were the case, Nicaraguan and Costa Rican intellectuals would have included the Caribbean coast as part of the nation. Instead, they saw it as a foreign land. That foreignness was produced by business and government policy. For example, Afro-Caribbeans were prohibited from traveling to the interior of Costa Rica, an apparent illusion that, as Costa Rican writer and politician Alberto Cañas Escalante surmised, was encouraged by the Northern Railway, which did not want to lose its ill-paid workers (2006:252). And government policy undid that illusion in 1950, by decreeing that any prohibition on the movement of blacks that might exist was thereby revoked (2006:253), thus opening the way for the integration of blacks in Costa Rican society.

Without exhausting the topic, we might ask what metaphors were coined discursively to flesh out the imaginary of each region. For a range of reasons, both internal and external to Central America, the isthmus (which is itself a metaphor) was imagined as a bridge between two oceans and two continents. From Columbus’ time until the construction of the Panama Canal, colonial and imperial powers seeking to cross from one ocean to the other referred to the region as that of the “estrecho dudoso,” of the “doubtful strait.” That the Panama Canal enabled imperial powers to engage in global trade eliminated the doubt, so to speak, but as a recent, and the largest ever, exhibition of Central American art\(^4\) proposes, perhaps it is worth

\[\ldots\] re-inserting that doubt in the present context, of a region that might continue to be doubtful, but in any case, that continues to doubt. This event […] stems from a strong feeling of belonging and reflection on Place, and on where each one locates himself. With the recent globalization processes and the growing flux of people, information, cultures, it would seem the world has become narrower [a play on the double meaning of the word “estrecho”], more connected, closer. However, this ‘strait’ would also be ‘doubtful’ inasmuch as these global processes have been accompanied by an increase in the physical and symbolic limits, a proliferation of security systems as well as control and surveillance instruments. (TEOR/ética 2006)

This notion of *bridge,* in turn, also transforms into a corridor, a biological corridor on which the world’s second largest reserve of biodiversity

\(^4\)The exhibition “Estrecho Dudoso” curated by Virginia Pérez-Ratton and Tamara Díaz Bringas took place in San José, Costa Rica from December 2006 to February 2007.
is located. But as La loca de Gandoca and the work of the Asociación Cultural InCorpore\(^5\) show, this notion of reserve is also doubtful and must be reversed. What “Mesoamérica”\(^6\) also proposes is that there is no homogeneity in Central America and that just like its biological diversity, the region is composed of a complex diversity of peoples: indigenous groups, Afro–Central Americans, mestizos and whites, migrants, youth gangs, tourists, retirees, and a myriad other formations, from gays and lesbians to new age alternative medicine practitioners. Moreover, the media have both standardized and complexified this diversity. On the one hand, transnational media, on the other, local media that work in tandem with the myriad groups. Such a diversity of peoples was already present in the early 20\(^{th}\) century, when the Afro–Caribbean peoples on the Atlantic coast consolidated as communities. This is evident in the two historical novels that I reviewed.

Toward the beginning of Limón Blues, the protagonist, Orlandus Robinson, looking for work moves to the coastal banana export city, Puerto Limón, and exchanges love (or lust)-at-first-sight glances with the wife of a minister from the capital who is part of an entourage summoned by the real power of the country, Minor C. Keith, director of the United Fruit Company. As he moves from this scene, knowing that he is out of place, the narrator gives a demographic profile of the ambience through which he walks. Between the white upper classes, to one side, the good side of the tracks, so to speak, and the black “unwashed” as they are called by the local newspaper, the narrator gives the following description:

En medio de esos extremos, miles de actividades: las funciones de las logias que terminaban en vistosos desfiles; las ceremonias, en hebreo y ladino, de hombres que usaban una gorrita redonda en la coronilla y cuyas mujeres le sacaban a los carneros toda la sangre; las reuniones donde chinos y chinas en lugares cerrados fumaban opio o jugaban mah jong; las fiestas de los empleados de la United, donde el bourbon corría libre y las esposas terminaban totalmente ebrias para escapar del hastío de la Zona; las plazas llenas de pañas en asonadas políticas por las elecciones; las caminatas vespertinas de la clase media para sentarse en las sodas a comer

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5 A non-profit cultural association based in San José, Costa Rica, which promotes the acknowledgement, consolidation and sustainability of Central American cultural productions (see InCorpore 2003).

6 This project emerged in the context of Asociación Cultural InCorpore.
This dialectic of dispersion and regularity is also at the heart of Benítez Rojo’s metaphor for the Caribbean: Chaos, which is taken “to mean that, within the [dis]order that swarms around what we already know of as Nature, it is possible to observe dynamic states or regularities that repeat themselves globally” (1996:2-3). That repetition is embodied in the phrase “de cierta manera,” kind of and hence “not exactly,” which is the movement of différence, as Derrida explained. “De cierta manera” is Caribbean difference, it is there in the way Caribbeans move, walk, speak, and most of all write. As such, it is a version of Derrida’s “trace” and “arche-writing,” a primary spacing and differentiation (see 1976:56-57; 60-62; 70-71). Moreover, “de cierta manera” is what exorcises apocalypse and violence (Benítez Rojo 1996:16) by which I understand Benítez Rojo to mean revolution and colonialism/imperialism.

To be sure, some of what Benítez Rojo characterizes as Caribbean, and which is not to be confused with a geographic location, takes place in the two novels from which I quoted. Situated historically in the 1920s, the novels examine how Garvey and his followers sought to exorcise “una máquina colossal [the United Fruit Company] que cruce sin doblegarse valles, desiertos, serranías” (Ross 2000:78) and third class status in the eyes of Costa Ricans who inhabit the Central Valley, and who proclaim their imagined community to be Hispanic, white and Catholic. And implicitly, at least, the two novels present Garvey’s Afrocentrism critically, particularly since the goal of returning to Africa ends up being one huge illusion. Yet it is an illusion that Garvey’s followers stick to, even knowing that, like the shares that they bought in the Black Star Fleet, it has no value, other than to constitute them as a community.

In his discussion of the Caribbean, Benítez Rojo both adopts and discards some of the metaphors that I briefly reviewed for Central America as apt for the Caribbean. It is only “de cierta manera” that the Caribbean is a bridge of islands. By that he means not a physical, geographic bridge, but a bridge between search and discovery, myth and history, resistance and power (1996:5): “I emphasized the words ‘de cierta manera’ because, if we took the Central America connection literally as that between the two subcontinents, the results would be much less productive and also removed from the concerns of this book” (1996:4).

Ultimately, Benítez Rojo’s metaphor for the Caribbean is a writerly one, that is, it is the very play of repetition and difference. And it is an apt metaphor for any place where writing – whether on paper, or in dance, or stone, or sport – takes place. That is, anywhere on earth. As such, it does not constitute grist for an imagined community, which usually needs greater fixity. And that is precisely the point. When one asks, as does Partha Chatterjee, for whom a community is imagined in this or that way, or according to this or that metaphor, he is multiplying and diversifying the frameworks of value, for an imagined community is exactly that, the construction of a set of values. And within this mode of questioning of models and metaphors of value, even Benítez Rojo’s deconstructive construction of an imagined region occupies only one place among many.

Extending Chatterjee’s question, then, we might ask for whom, when, where and in what manner is there receptivity for the metaphors of imagined communities, be they nations, regions or ethnicities. One answer to these questions is to track all the forces that bear on and shape national and regional formations. A criollo-mestizo identity emerged with the Liberal political ideology of the late 19th century and coffee production. With neoliberal restructuring from the 1980s on, the rise of environmental protection, and tourism as the major industry in Central America (over 10% of the Gross Regional Product), the activism of indigenous and Afro-Central Americans since 1992, buttressed by international organizations (European International Cooperation, Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, UNESCO) that promote cultural diversity and citizenship, it is no wonder that the Caribbean has acquired value and receptivity in this new formation. But that does not guarantee that non-elites will derive value within this context. It may only mean that elites and transnational corporations have captured the discourse of diversity and sustainability, as argued by Rossi in La loca de Gandoca, or as the protagonist of Caribe confirms in his own dubious claims that science will enable petroleum companies to extract oil without harming the environment.

In order to derive value from this conjuncture, local communities, artists, writers, producers, alternative tour operators, environmentalists, NGOs, international cooperation agencies, and even academics find ways
of working together, and in some cases have no other option than networking in order to create a critical mass that will offset hegemonic elites’ attempts to have the discourse mean (and do) what they want.

As is evident in the recent works that I have commented on, some writers have found a way of working within the new context. However, the tendency is not to do so alone, but in networks that bring together writers, filmmakers, musicians and local communities. They are part of a gambit to give their tonality to the hegemony of diversity and sustainability. They may be critical of it, but they have not abandoned it.

An important example is the work of late Belizian musician Andy Palacio (he died in January of 2008) and his producer and also musician Ivan Durán, director of the label Stonetree Records. A major effort of Palacio and Durán has been the continued enlivening – through innovation – of the traditional music of the Garífuna peoples of the Caribbean coast of Central America, from Belize to Nicaragua. The transformation over the past two decades of the regions they inhabit have brought about changes in their culture and many have called for preservation of customs. Andy Palacio, Ivan Durán, and the Garífuna Collective instead have innovated musically in order to keep alive the animating spirit of the culture, fusing the traditional rhythms with rock, hip hop, Cuban, and other Afro-Diasporic genres. This minority culture in Belize, which itself has a population of less than 300,000 people, generated two major award-winning CDs: From Bakabush. The First Ten Years of Stonetree, won Rolling Stone magazine’s best non-English language world music award in 2006, and Andy Palacio’s Watina won the 2007 Womex award for the best world music CD in any language. Both CDs were produced by Ivan Durán and Stonetree Records.

Another example of networking is the partnership between Honduran novelist Julio Escoto and musician Guillermo Anderson. The book, Del tiempo y el trópico/Of Time and the Tropics (2002), is a poetic, visual and musical archaeology of the Honduran Caribbean. It is critical of the complicity of elites, politicians and foreign powers, and seeks a sentimental and aesthetic solidarity among local community actors, professional writers, musicians and artists. You can see and hear Guillermo Anderson express this love and solidarity for the Honduran Mosquitia, its nature, its people, and its culture in the production “Documental Río Platano” on YouTube. It was funded by the German Cooperation Agency GTZ, dedicated to sustainable development, for the promotion of Anderson’s efforts to maintain the integral cultural-natural ecology of the Mosquitia region.

Similarly, the record label Papaya Music based in Costa Rica, although devoted primarily to music, is also engaged in the history and ecology of Costa Rica. Its founding group –la Orquesta de la Papaya, led by musician Manuel Obregón– is comprised by 14 musicians from all 7 countries of Central America. Subsequently, the label has dedicated itself to presenting music of all genres and subregions of the Isthmus. In this way, the label demonstrates its concern for the region. The novelist Yazmín Ross, who wrote La flota negra, briefly reviewed earlier, and her husband Luciano Capelli, filmmaker, are the producers of the label. Their goal is to disseminate the diversity of Central American music and culture. They also published a book on the Central American Caribbean, which, like their music label, patterned after Putumayo World Music, brings together the history of workers on the banana plantations and railroads of the region, the punta, the murgas and calypsos and other cultural works of Central American Afro-Caribbeans. The book is produced, like the CDs, to be sold to tourists, as a means of making profit. But at the same time, all of the work of Papaya Music seeks to give value to Central American culture and its people.

Moreover, music, more than literature, has both the potential to gain the popularity and the mass distribution that will support a shift in imagined communities, much like rock music in the USA ushered in a countercultural generation, or nueva trova and nueva canción a popular revolutionary one in Latin America. The key, of course, is to ensure circulation, through radio, television and distribution, which is a major challenge, given the penetration of music and television markets by the large transnational corporations.

I could mention other collaborations, such as those of Manuel Mo...
nesteel’s group Cantoamérica or the Cultural Association InCorpore, which originally worked with Manuel Obregón to bring together musicians from all over Central America and produced DVDs and CDs promoting the cultural diversity of the region. They too have worked to articulate local communities, cultural traditions, new aesthetic fusions, environmental and social justice, and pressure on governments to give them distribution conditions that will allow them to compete with large transnational conglomerates. Distribution is the *sine qua non* for writers, musicians, artists, and local communities to both have their work put in public spheres as well as to bring an economic return. Without the latter, the symbols and values of these people will not circulate and hence not contribute to creating a new imaginary.

The last decade has seen these and many other initiatives to create a Central America-wide sense of commonality in diversity. From the literary and academic spheres, exemplified by the annual Meetings of the Congreso Centroamericano de Historia, the Congreso Centroamericano de Estudios Culturales y Literarios, the on-line journal *Istmo. Revista virtual de estudios literarios y culturales centroamericanos*, to intergovernmental projects like the Campaña de sensibilización sobre la integración centroamericana [Central American Consciousness-Raising Campaign] of the Program to Support Central American Regional Integration (PAIRCA), in turn a project of the System for Central American Integration (SICA), there is increasing activism for Central Americans to know each other, not only nationally, but subnationally as well. PAIRCA’s communication campaign (which has sponsored ads that feature prominent fi-

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13 http://groups.google.co.cr/group/boletinhistoria_ucr/msg/705e974b3e494229 (May 10th 2009).

14 See http://collaborations.denison.edu/istmo/ (May 10th 2009).

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