

Rewriting the Biracial Love Story in Rosa María Britton's *Esa esquina del paraíso*

Frances Jaeger
Northern Illinois University
fjaeger@niu.edu

While nineteenth-century Latin American foundational fictions sought racial and social harmony through the genre of romance, by the twentieth century these biracial love story tropes are subject to intense scrutiny. Panamanian novelist Rosa María Britton's drama, *Esa esquina del paraíso* (1986), as analyzed with new approaches, produces a critical reassessment by reframing these established narratives in ways that reveal significant cracks in the creole elite's optimistic view of romance as a means to bridge social and racial divides. By comparing the play's biracial protagonist, Eugenia/Jenny, with the tragic mulata heroine prototype of the classic Cuban novel, *Cecilia Valdés* (1839), differences between the two characters expose crucial shifts and innovative positions. The established tropes that worked so well in the elite's vision of racial harmony become ineffectual acts of mimicry. With startling frankness *Esa esquina del paraíso* presents a woman-centered retelling of a traditional male discourse which, while not leading to the proposed goal of economic stability and personal fulfillment for the female protagonist, does uncover significant limitations in nineteenth-century imaginings of race and class.

Keywords: Contemporary Latin American theater, Panamanian literature, race, gender, mestizaje, twentieth-century Latin America literature

Las ficciones fundacionales latinoamericanas del siglo diecinueve buscaban establecer la armonía racial y social por la vía del romance; en el siglo veinte, en cambio, las puestas en escena de historias de amor racialmente híbridas empezaron a ser cuestionadas. Este estudio del drama *Esa esquina del paraíso* (1986), de la novelista panameña Rosa María Britton, emplea nuevos acercamientos críticos que desacreditan la visión optimista de las élites criollas hacia el romance como mecanismo de superación de las divisiones sociales y raciales. Si comparamos la protagonista del drama panameño, Eugenia/Jenny, con la prototípica heroína mulata de la novela clásica cubana *Cecilia Valdés* (1839), descubrimos cambios significativos. La eficaz representación de la armonía racial que proyectaba el discurso de la élite es vista aquí como mimetismo del subalterno. *Esa esquina del paraíso* nos enfrenta a una audaz y directa reelaboración ginocéntrica del discurso tradicional masculino que revela importantes limitaciones del imaginario decimonónico respecto a raza y clase, si bien no alcanza la meta proyectada de la estabilidad económica y realización personal de la protagonista femenina.

Palabras clave: teatro latinoamericano contemporáneo, literatura de Panamá, raza, género, mestizaje, literatura latinoamericana siglo veinte

Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Contexts

In the nineteenth century, the concept of *mestizaje* promised newly formed Latin American republics a means to achieve unity and equality.¹ While the idea of *mestizaje* was embraced by the Latin American elite during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, theory remained divorced from actual social practices regarding the status of mixed race individuals.² Within this context, the biracial love story as it appears in novels of this period, centering on the romantic relationships between upper-class white men and lower-class indigenous, black or mulata³ women, can be seen as part of these racial/national imaginings from a hegemonic, male-dominant viewpoint. In other words, biracial love stories play a fundamental role in upholding how the Latin American creole elite gave the appearance of embracing the progressive ideal of a harmonious, racially diverse society while retaining the standing and privilege inherited from a Spanish colonial legacy.

The traditional biracial love story, then, provides the required narratives to sustain *mestizaje* as a means to coalesce conflicting social and racial sectors without seeming to resort to oppressive means. While these narratives are often based on unequal romantic relationships in terms of race and class, the love story gives the illusion that existing hierarchies can be breached and overcome, at least in the romantic sphere. Fundamentally, these biracial love stories project the collective national imaginings in racial terms. Using Benedict Anderson as a point of departure, we can analyze how “an imagined political community” (1996, 6) envisions itself. If nations “are to be distinguished . . . by the style in which they are imagined” (1996, 6), then the literary tropes of the biracial love story are particularly significant, not only because they address a future of racial harmony but also in how they contend with current inequalities and social conflict.⁴ Instead of confronting issues of race, gender, and *mestizaje* openly, the narratives of the biracial love story as established by the discourse of

¹ As Vera M. Kutzinski observes in *Sugar's Secrets*, the term *mestizaje* lends itself to multiple equivalencies in English: “*Mestizaje* can variably be translated as miscegenation, racial amalgamation (as in *blanqueamiento*, whitening), creolization, racial mixing, inter- or transculturation. . . . It is perhaps best described as a peculiar form of multiculturalism—one that has circulated in the Caribbean and in Hispanic America, most notoriously in Brazil, as a series of discursive formations tied to nationalist interests and ideologies. . . . This multiculturalism acknowledges, indeed celebrates, racial diversity while at the same time disavowing divisive social realities” (1993, 4–5).

² Doris Sommer clarifies that there is a distinction between idealistic projections and actual racial practices: “As a rhetorical solution to the crises in these novels/nations, miscegenation (an unfortunate translation for *mestizaje*, which is practically a slogan for many projects of national consolidation) is often the figure for pacification of the ‘primitive’ or ‘barbarous’ sector. Yet, sometimes the terms of desired amalgams slip from synecdochal figures for different races to metaphoric representations of color-coded factions among the creole elite. The legitimating alliances announced by the racial alchemy may therefore have less to do with race relations than with the political flirtations between ‘liberal’ dark horses and ‘conservative’ ruling sectors” (1991, 22).

³ Like many contemporary scholars, we shall use the terms “mulato” and “mulata” throughout to avoid “mulatto” and “mulatta,” described as “now sometimes offensive” by the standard reference for English language use in this journal, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. “Mulatta” and “Mulatto.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2020.

⁴ It is not my intention here to participate in the debate on the validity of the specifics of Benedict Anderson's musings on print culture and the creoles in *Imagined Communities* (1996). Rather, I am using “his characterization of nations as ‘imagined communities’” (Halperin Donghi 2003, 34) as an entry point to consider certain false narratives about the origins of *mestizaje*.

nineteenth-century novels gloss over and avoid the realities of conquest, such as rape, coercion, and other forms of violence in favor of a more palpable, albeit less realistic, image of love and affection.

While the romance novels of the nineteenth century sought resolution of social conflict through the biracial love story, literary works of the twentieth century evidence an increasing dissatisfaction with the Latin American elite's view that mestizaje functions as an equalizing force. One example of a contemporary work that revisits the biracial love story with a critical eye is Panamanian author Rosa María Britton's play *Esa esquina del paraíso* (*That Corner of Paradise*, 1986). By reformulating the figure of the tragic mulata heroine and retelling the biracial love story from the woman's point of view, the play exposes and undermines the storylines that have upheld the concept of mestizaje as conceived by the Latin American elite.⁵ The shift from the male-centered to a female-centered representation of socially unequal biracial relationships destabilizes the foundational fictions built on neutralizing opposing sectors through the power of romance. As *Esa esquina del paraíso* displays, the old paradigms never provided a promising future, at least not for the mixed-race offspring of biracial love stories. However, Britton's play also reveals the extent to which individual agency is insufficient to alter this legacy of injustice.

In addition to a critical representation of the shortcomings of each national imagining with regard to race, *Esa esquina del paraíso* contains two important rewritings of narrative staples that demonstrate the two protagonists' contestation to official views on mestizaje. The first of these is the tragic mulata heroine of nineteenth-century novels. Clearly, the main protagonist can be regarded as a descendent from this narrative figure that populates the pages of Caribbean literature. Nevertheless, how Eugenia/Jenny differs from this prototype, especially with regard to her manipulation of the conceptualizations of racial identity in two different cultural contexts, provides a revealing commentary about the failure of mestizaje to integrate mulatos and mestizos into the larger national fabric. The second narrative staple, the biracial love story, also diverges from the model. In the retellings that Rosa, Eugenia/Jenny's mother, undertakes, the role of women as well as mulatos and mestizos is brought to the forefront, once again highlighting how official narratives succeeded in silencing these voices. While the critical stance toward nineteenth-century racial/national imaginings echoes other twentieth century works, *Esa esquina del paraíso* highlights both Eugenia/Jenny and Rosa's agency to change their lives and change hegemonic narratives. While this work exposes racial and social inequalities of Panamanian, and by extension, Latin American and Caribbean societies, its protagonists unwittingly reveal the extent to which their personal and individual actions to refashion mestizaje are insufficient to change their fate.

⁵ Kutzinski observes that "there is no place for the mulata in the culture and the society that so consistently represents itself through her. The iconic mulata, then, is a symbolic container for all the tricky questions about how race, gender and sexuality inflect the power relations" (1993, 7). Unlike nineteenth-century romances, *Esa esquina del paraíso* gives the mixed-race individual a voice to express the frustrations of being displaced and invisible in a society that upholds racial mixing as an ideological ideal.

The Complex Histories of Racism in Panamá and the Canal Zone

Black-white racial relations in Panamá historically have involved three main conditioning factors: an African-descended presence since the Spanish conquest known as “colonial blacks” and residing mainly in the relatively undeveloped Darién area; a massive influx of black workers from (mainly) anglophone Caribbean islands during the construction of the canal (1904–1914), who remained and settled in Panamá; and the establishment and occupation of the Zone by US administrators and military until its transfer in 1999 under the Torrijos-Carter agreement.

As an independent nation after 1903, Panama grew to define itself as a perfect racial “melting pot” of Spanish-speakers in which whites, indigenous people, and colonial blacks merged as equals in one nation. Under this system the only “blacks” were those of West Indian origin with English names (Priestley and Barrow 2010, 131–132). The “hated West Indians” were considered intellectually and racially inferior to Panamanians, and this sentiment fueled cries against non-Spanish-speaking blacks and eventual laws against their immigration (Andrews, 2004, 140). Continuing conflicts between Panamanians and West Indians were considered by historian George Westerman as a question of social and cultural differences more than of race (1980, 106).

For one descendant of West Indians, the system implanted during the construction of the canal amounted to apartheid, as white laborers were paid in gold currency (Gold Roll) roughly double what the nonwhites were paid in silver (Silver Roll): “They drank from different water fountains, lived in separate barracks, of course with separate and different conditions, separate health services” (Barrow 1991, 81).

Racism in the Canal Zone was often called “Jim Crow” and considered akin to racial discrimination in the Southern US: “The Canal Zone was a closed system reminiscent of the plantation estate which once dominated socio-economic life in most of the Circum-Caribbean. . . . The government pursued a rigid policy of discrimination and segregation based on race and nationality, which affected every facet of life and organization within the borders of the Zone. . . . (Bryce Laporte 1998, 102). In this rigid quasi-caste system, racial lines were clear: “Every white American was ascribed at birth or upon entering the Zone as superordinate over every colored person, regardless of nationality, age, years of service, sex, and the like. This *de facto* relationship was an apparent extension of the *de jure* subjugation intertwined in the official structure of the Canal Zone and was undoubtedly reinforced by it in every institutional way of life in the Zone” (103).

Sociologists John and Mavis Biesanz offer some practical implications of the spread of Zonian white supremacist practices beyond its borders. In Panama, Zonian and other US models influenced the preference for marriage to “light-skinned” partners and the use of whitening creams by young people in order to appear more Caucasian (1993, 323). Whereas Panamanians and assimilated West Indians freely accept that marriages and nonmarital unions between their groups were “no longer considered tragedies” by the mid-1950s, in the Canal Zone black-white sexual relations were rare (Biesanz 1993, 322, 331).

This is the historical backdrop, fraught with racial tensions, of Panama between 1957 and 1977 against which Britton projects her characters and portrays the aspirations and decisions they must make, the obstacles and dilemmas they must face.

Reimagining the Tragic Mulata Heroine

In 1986 *Esa esquina del paraíso* received the Ricardo Miró National Literature Prize, succeeded by Britton's *Mi\$\$ Panamá, Inc.* and *Banquete de despedida* (*Farewell Banquet*), both of which were awarded the Miró in 1987. These three plays, plus *Los loros no lloran* (*Parrots Don't Cry*), were to mark Britton's brief incursion into theater, which ended when her closest contacts in the Panamanian theater community succumbed to AIDS.⁶ Previous to these plays, Rosa María Britton was a recognized novelist and short story writer, earning Miró awards for her first novel, *El ataúd de uso* (*Used Coffin*) in 1982, her second novel, *El señor de las lluvias y el viento* (*Lord of Rains and Wind*), in 1984, both of which are now part of the Panamanian school curriculum, as well as the short story collection *¿Quién inventó el mambo?* (*Who Invented the Mambo?*) in 1985. After her brief foray into theater, Britton continued to focus on novels with *No pertenezco a este siglo* (*I Don't Belong to this Century*, 1989), *Todas íbamos a ser reinas* (*All of Us Girls Were Going to be Queens*, 1997), *Laberinto de orgullo* (*Labyrinth of Pride*, 2002), *Suspiros de fantasmas* (*Phantoms' Sighs*, 2005), *Tocino del cielo* (*Heavenly Custard*, 2016), as well as the short story with the collections: *Semana de mujeres y otras calamidades* (*Women's Week and Other Calamities*, 1995), *La nariz invisible y otros misterios* (*The Invisible Nose and Other Mysteries*, 2001), and *Historia de mujeres crueles* (*History of Cruel Women*, 2010). A prolific writer, in 1998 Britton was awarded the Golden Pen Award in Panama for having sold more books than any other national author. Interestingly enough, her handbook on women's bodies and sexuality, *La costilla de Adán* (*Adam's Rib*, 1985), reached an even wider audience than her fiction, to the point that complete strangers would stop her on the street to thank her.⁷

With outspoken frankness *Esa esquina del paraíso* and *Mi\$\$ Panamá Inc.* confront racism and discrimination as practiced in Panama and the Canal Zone.⁸

Esa esquina del paraíso traces the career of an ambitious young woman (Eugenia, later renamed Jenny) in the pursuit of her goal to marry a US citizen from the Canal Zone and thereby achieve her "corner of paradise." While she is aided by the financial sacrifices of her mother, Rosa, it is the particularity of her white skin and blond hair—despite the fact that her parents and sisters are black—that allows her to even embark on such a plan. While Britton's aim was to address issues of race head-on, *Esa esquina del paraíso* assumes that the spectators, just like the main protagonists, are cognizant of subtle differences in how racial discrimination is manifested in the Caribbean diaspora as opposed to the US Canal Zone. For this reason, there is an explicit articulation throughout the play of how Rosa

⁶ Britton, personal communication. As Britton clarifies in her interview with Lee A. Daniel, she considers herself a novelist, not a dramatist (Daniel 2000, 183).

⁷ Britton, personal communication, 1999.

⁸ In her interview with Humberto López Cruz, Britton clarifies that her goal was to confront the racial prejudice experienced by mixed race individuals, especially those deemed not white enough (López Cruz 1999, 124).

and Eugenia/Jenny are aware that in Panama being whiter means being able to attain better positions of employment and opportunities. At the same time, once Eugenia/Jenny lands a coveted job in the Canal Zone during the time when Jim Crow was still practiced, she is conscious that she must pass as white. In short, the play itself constantly confronts two forms of racism: the Caribbean's spectrum, which recognizes a range of skin tones culminating in whiteness, and the Jim Crow of the American South, which denies any sort of racial mixing by insisting there is only black or white. Eugenia/Jenny finds herself constantly managing and manipulating these two racist attitudes throughout *Esa esquina del paraíso*.

The play uses a split stage to move the dramatic action between two places and time periods. One half of the stage portrays action in the popular lower-class Calle Trece in Panama City from 1957 to 1967 and represents Rosa's living room, while the other half focuses on two days in 1977 in Jenny's upper-class, luxurious apartment in the El Cangrejo district. This shifting between times and Panama City neighborhoods allows the audience to see certain aspects of Eugenia/Jenny's development in retrospect, as well as clarify such details as to why Rosa, in 1977, is pretending to be Jenny's maid. The overarching narrative, however, is centered on Rosa's ambitions for her light-skinned daughter, documenting her sacrifices to get Eugenia into a prestigious private school, her gradual erasure from Eugenia's life, since all efforts are directed to maintaining the deception that Eugenia is white, and her almost total abandonment of her dark-skinned daughters.

We see Eugenia transform herself into Jenny, her academic and professional successes, and her achievement of securing employment in the Canal Zone in a coveted position, given the better pay and working conditions. Just when it seems that all her aspirations are within reach, her sister Clotilde sabotages her relationship with Jerry Wilcox by revealing to him the truth about Eugenia/Jenny's racial origins, causing him to break off their engagement. She never recovers from this setback, and as a result we see a cynical, bitter Jenny in 1977 watching her contemporaries marry and move to the United States, while she is little more than a prostitute who parties with American servicemen in order to maintain her lavish apartment.

At first glance, Eugenia's situation has striking parallels with Cuba's Cecilia Valdés,⁹ the prototypical nineteenth-century mulata heroine of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.¹⁰ Both protagonists willingly enter into biracial relationships and reject mulato suitors because they see a

⁹ While this sprawling Cuban novel, *Cecilia Valdés* (1839) by Cirilo Villaverde, includes many plots and subplots, the heroine of the title is the mulata lover of Leonardo Gamboa. Neither is aware that they are siblings because Leonardo's father, a Spaniard, had taken Cecilia's mother as his lover years earlier. Cecilia is convinced that Leonardo will marry her, despite strong evidence that he is wooing a wealth heiress. The novel ends in tragedy: Leonardo is murdered by another admirer of Cecilia, and she is confined to the same hospital where her mother was interned for insanity.

¹⁰ Ineke Phaf's description of the mulata girl character in nineteenth- and twentieth-century folk drama can just as easily be applied to Eugenia as to Cecilia Valdés: "She is attractive and self-assured and her paramount trait of character is an unbridled opportunism in affairs of the heart, in which her prime considerations are money and status" (1985, 178).

relationship with a white man as a means to social and economic advancement,¹¹ yet each protagonist's ultimate fate is social exclusion. Cecilia is confined to an insane asylum, while Eugenia exists in social limbo because she cannot find a place in Panamanian, Zonian, or US society. In addition, they are not the first in their families to cross racial boundaries.¹² Both Cecilia's mother and grandmother had white lovers, and Eugenia's mother prostituted herself in order to give birth to a light-skinned child. Cecilia and Eugenia are also conscious that their physical allure is their strongest asset because it enables them to attract white lovers.¹³ Unlike the tragic mulatta heroine of US novels, neither is brutalized, raped, or forced into a relationship against her will.¹⁴ In fact, instead of being a passive, helpless victim, each protagonist chooses her lovers.

Nevertheless, it is erroneous to assume that this option to choose implies that Cecilia and Eugenia exercise absolute control over their lives. As Suzanne Bost points out for Cecilia, even their choices are limited by circumstances and do not necessarily reflect individual desires and feelings: "Yet this choice is less personal than it is structural: Cecilia follows the model of her mother and grandmother, repeatedly playing their assigned roles in a hierarchy that positions dark-skinned women at the mercy of light-skinned men" (2003, 105). In this scenario, choice reduces itself to a voluntary acquiescence to preestablished power structures. As Frantz Fanon has pointed out, the mulata feels pressured "not only to turn white but also to avoid slipping back. What indeed could be more illogical than a mulatto woman's acceptance of a Negro husband? For it must be understood once and for all that it is a question of saving the race" (1967, 54–55). Within this context, choice seems less an expression of free will and individual desire, and more of an acceptance that this unequal partnership is the best option available.

If choice is, as Bost affirms, structural rather than personal, then it stands to reason that any prosperous white man can fulfill the role. This point is emphasized in *Esa esquina del paraíso* when Eugenia announces to Rosa that she is engaged and will soon marry. Curiously, when their goal is within reach, Rosa expresses her misgivings for the first time: she asks if Eugenia really loves Jerry Wilcox. Eugenia's response makes it clear that her enthusiasm for Jerry is about what he represents, not who he is. As Eugenia continues to answer Rosa's question, it becomes obvious that what Bost points out about Cecilia's choice is also applicable to Eugenia: the personal, that is, individual desires, feelings, and wishes, do not enter into this choice:

¿Enamorada? Claro que sí... puede ser... no estoy muy segura... Es todo el conjunto (. . .). Son los sables, las calles rectas sin basura, el comisariato, la nieve, es Atlanta, es

¹¹ In this aspect, the words that describe Cecilia's rationale could be equally applied to Eugenia/Jenny, who "aspires to marry a white man to improve her station rather than to lower herself by marrying a fellow mulatto" (Bost 2003, 103).

¹² As Phaf observes, mulatos in colonial Cuba had better opportunities at improving their lot in life because the possibility of some support from their white fathers existed there (1985, 170–171).

¹³ Nevertheless, their attractiveness depends on cultivating an appearance of whiteness. As Phaf notes: "This process of assimilation started with the outward appearance: the lighter the skin, the straighter the hair, the more chance there was of partial integration into the colonial élite, the only group with money" (1985, 171).

¹⁴ In her contrastive study, Bost clarifies that "U.S. tragic mulatta narratives often originate with the rape of a virtuous black woman by a white male" (2003, 105).

todo el conjunto. ¿Enamorada? Creo que la única vez que me he sentido así flotando entre nubes y con esa angustia en la barriga, como dicen los libros, fue durante mi primer año en el Banco. Había un muchacho llamado Fernando (. .) que estaba detrás de mí y salí con él varias veces, aunque tú nunca te enteraste. Una vez se le ocurrió llevarme a su casa a conocer a la familia. Vivían igual que nosotros, detrás de una rejilla y más nunca quise salir con él, pero me estuvo doliendo su recuerdo por mucho tiempo... Lo he visto por ahí, se casó hace años y como buen panameño, anda todo el tiempo con otras mujeres. (Britton 1999, 71)

[In love? Of course... maybe... I'm not really sure. It's the entire package (. .). It's the sabers, the streets without garbage, the commissary, snow, it's Atlanta, it's the whole thing. In love? I think the only time I felt like I was floating on air with butterflies in my stomach, as the books say, was during my first year at the bank. There was a guy there, Fernando, who was interested in me, and I went out with him a few times—you didn't find out about it. Once he took me home to meet his family. They lived just like us, behind a metal gate, so I didn't want to go out with him anymore, although the memory of him was painful for a long time... I have seen him around, he got married a few years ago, and like a good Panamanian man, he runs around with other women.]¹⁵

What Eugenia's explanation clarifies is that while she has some level of choice in who she targets and pursues, the realities of both societies limit her to a marriage of convenience with an American serviceman, which offers some economic stability, or marriage to a Panamanian man who will probably be unfaithful to her and limit her to her current social and financial status.¹⁶ In this respect, her rationale echoes that of Cecilia Valdés.

Even though Eugenia/Jenny can be viewed as a twentieth-century rendering of the tragic mulata heroine, her actions to change her racially and socially determined destiny mark a change from her nineteenth-century counterpart. For example, Eugenia/Jenny invests all her energies in a plan to legitimize her social standing through marriage, and unlike Cecilia, controls access to her body as a means to acquire tangible proof (i.e., a ring) that a marriage will take place. Throughout *Esa esquina del paraíso*, Eugenia/Jenny views her engagement and future marriage to Jerry as her only means to enter a sphere that will give her equality, opportunity, and fulfillment.¹⁷ In contrast, Cecilia Valdés's love for

¹⁵ All translations from *Esa esquina del paraíso* are mine.

¹⁶ Eugenia/Jenny's situation is not unique. In fact, in discussing how the mulata invests all her energy in the pursuit of a white man, Frantz Fanon's quote from Abdoulaye Sadi's *Présence Africaine* is descriptive of the conflict in *Esa esquina del paraíso*: "They [mulata women] must have white men, completely white, and nothing else will do. Almost all of them spend their entire lives waiting for this stroke of luck, which is anything but likely. And they are still waiting when old age overtakes them and forces them deep into dark refuges where the dream finally grows into haughty resignation" (1967, 57–58). While I have not developed this point here, the play opens with a bitter Jenny who constantly reminds herself of her failure to secure Jerry Wilcox.

¹⁷ Once again, Fanon's observations coincide with Eugenia/Jenny's situation: "There is a psychological phenomenon that consists in the belief that the world will open to the extent to which frontiers are broken down" (1967, 21). Clearly, both Eugenia and her mother believe that completing the final step, marriage, will open all the doors that have been closed to both until now.

Leonardo Gamboa is an end in itself, since she aspires to love and be loved. Her relationship with a white man changes nothing because she cannot legitimize her relationship, despite her personal illusions that such a union will somehow take place (even in the face of everyone else's insistence that it will never be). In short, Cecilia, the dreamer, does not marry Gamboa and remains at the margins of society, but Eugenia, the schemer and planner, believes that if she can overcome all the obstacles, marriage to a white man (and all the perceived advantages that come with it) is her justified (and justifiable) reward.¹⁸

This fundamental difference between Eugenia/Jenny and the prototypical tragic mulata heroine exemplifies the extent to which *Esa esquina del paraíso* shifts the discourse of mestizaje to a woman-centered perspective and endows Eugenia with a degree of agency that her nineteenth century counterpart lacks. Instead of her accepting the marginalized position of a mistress set up in a man's second household, his *casa chica*—that is to say, accepting a secondary position as lover with no legal claim on the man—, the pursuit of marriage becomes one of the few options for socioeconomic advancement. Eugenia/Jenny does not wait for a lover to visit her (as Cecilia does), but rather she seeks him out, all the while clarifying that what she wants is marriage. In short, she develops a plan and executes it. Of course, the actions she undertakes benefit herself, so this may explain why her sacrifices do not have the same consequences. Unlike Cecilia Valdés, Eugenia/Jenny is less engaged emotionally in her relationship: she does not go mad and become institutionalized like her nineteenth-century Cuban counterpart. When her plan fails, she becomes bitter but does not resort to violent revenge as Cecilia does.

While Eugenia/Jenny's agency takes the form of resistance to the status quo, it also requires extensive knowledge of how race, especially racial difference, is perceived in both Panamanian and US societies. Throughout *Esa esquina del paraíso*, Eugenia/Jenny demonstrates her consciousness of how her race and class are perceived by others, as well as the effects such interpretations have on her. For example, the play includes numerous terms commonly associated with mestizo societies: Eugenia/Jenny acknowledges herself as a "salto adelante" (a "leap forward"); her aunt Mercedes worries what will happen if Eugenia gives birth to a "salto atrás" ("a leap backwards").¹⁹ At one point, Eugenia/Jenny acknowledges that the skill of "reading" the racial and social signs of a person is a vital in order to succeed in Panama, when she confronts Rosa during an argument:

¹⁸ The socioeconomic territories that Eugenia/Jenny manages are complex and require our protagonist to have a keen understanding of how each social sphere is organized. To cite only one example, Eugenia is conscious that the racial and economic standing in the Zone is determined by the gold and silver roll pay grades. As David McCullough clarifies, the two pay grades initially used to distinguish skilled and unskilled labor became the de facto means of differentiation between white and black workers (1977, 472).

¹⁹ In his discussion of mulatas Fanon is harsh in his criticism of mixed-race women striving to improve their lot in life through their choice of lover or spouse. In my opinion, he loses sight that the actions and choices of mulatas are not the cause of racial disparity but reactions to a racial reality that already exists. Nevertheless, his observation on the prevalence of a specialized racial vocabulary centered on attaining whiteness coincides with the racial landscape that Eugenia and Rosa attempt to manage: "The number of sayings, proverbs, petty rules of conduct that govern the choice of a lover in the Antilles is astounding. It is always essential to avoid falling back into the pit of niggerhood, and every woman in the Antilles, whether in a casual flirtation or in a serious affair, is determined to select the least black of the men" (1967, 47). Clearly, Eugenia and Rosa are as equally conditioned as the Antillean women whom Fanon discusses.

... tú, a golpe de ojo, puedes determinar si una persona vale la pena o no. Siempre te he admirado ese talento que tienes para catalogar a la gente a la distancia y lo mejor es que raramente te equivocas. Donde pones la nariz, hueles la verdad... inmediatamente sabes de raza y procedencia social. ¡No tienes idea cuánto te admiro! Si yo hubiera heredado tus cualidades, no me habría equivocado tantas veces, pero desgraciadamente, salí a mi padre, quienquiera que haya sido él.... (Britton 1999, 36)

[... you, at a glance, can tell if another person is worth it or not. I have always admired your talent for categorizing people at a distance, and what is even better is that you rarely make a mistake. Wherever you stick your nose, you sniff out the truth... immediately you know racial and social origins. You have no idea how much I admire that in you! If I had inherited those abilities, I wouldn't have made so many mistakes but, unfortunately, I take after my father, whoever he may have been....]

This quote is particularly revealing because it identifies the vital point upon which Eugenia/Jenny and Rosa's plan to marry upwards depends: while most Panamanians are equipped to read racial clues such as hair texture, shape of facial features, and skin tone, white Americans in the Zone possess no such skills. Of course, this ignorance emerges from United States' refusal to define itself as a mestizo nation, and its citizens lack the requisite knowledge and vocabulary to recognize complex gradations of race and class.²⁰ Jerry Wilcox is convinced that he is engaged to a blond Panamanian, little suspecting that the curl of her hair at the beach and her ability to tan easily are indications that she is not white but of mixed race. Without the revelation from Eugenia's jealous sister, Clotilde, he would have married Jenny without any suspicion about her racial origins. Within the context of the tragic mulata heroine, what sets Eugenia/Jenny apart is not only that she consciously exploits this ignorance of white Americans to create this deception, but also that this deception requires an extensive knowledge of how race and class differences are perceived and constructed in each society. In this sense, the character of Eugenia/Jenny is an agent who exposes such social and racial inequalities to a much greater extent than the prototypical mulata heroine.

Reimagining the Biracial Love Story

The rewriting of the tragic mulata heroine trope, however, is only one part of recasting the biracial love story in *Esa esquina del paraíso*. Another is the critical stance toward the sentimental, romantic notion of mutual attraction between two people of different races. As mentioned, the prototypical biracial love story glosses over the unequal racial and social status of the lovers. Instead,

²⁰ In her extensive study on tragic mulata heroines in US literature Bost clarifies that the very existence of these mulata figures "disproves the myth of an impassable gulf between the races. They are a 'living reminder' that black and white members of plantation families are related. . . . [The mulata] signifies a breakdown in the order, a lack of consent, an impure family member. Not only does [she] serve as a reminder of white men's transgressions, but her mixed-race identity itself crosses the line between black and white and shows where their differentiation becomes impossible" (2003, 62). In practical terms, this refusal to acknowledge miscegenation in US society leaves the Zonians in Britton's play, many of whom come from the South, unable to "read" racial signs.

the heady feelings of love and attraction seem to overcome the inequalities, creating the illusion that the romance is both voluntary and desired by both parties. Nevertheless, such a narrative conveniently ignores the realities of the conquest narrative: that most of these relationships were forced and often violent. In other words, the origin of the mestizo nation is based on rape, rather than romance. Romantic narratives, then, become a coping mechanism that allows the obfuscation of uncomfortable truths that undermine myths of racial homogenization at the core of the mestizo nation's conceptualizations. What is compelling in *Esa esquina del paraíso* is the extent to which Eugenia/Jenny exposes these romantic stories as false narratives, thereby highlighting flaws in the dominant narrative. Basically, this mixed-race protagonist questions, challenges, and ultimately destroys a discourse that has marginalized and silenced her.

Since Rosa and Eugenia live in constant fear that the latter's true racial identity will be exposed at any moment, Rosa creates two false narratives in order to minimize rumors and suspicions. Interestingly enough, while these false narratives seek to mimic the biracial love story as conceived by a creole elite, they also attempt to rewrite it by refocusing on the feminine side of the biracial love story dichotomy. In this sense, Rosa's false narratives exemplify what Homi Bhabha terms as "slippage" or a "difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (1984, 126).²¹ If we accept that "mimicry is . . . the sign of a double articulation: a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (126), then Rosa's false narratives can be analyzed as her attempts to wrest control of a discourse of mestizaje that has traditionally marginalized her as well as her daughter. What is most striking in these false narratives is how they expose flaws in the view that mestizaje is a means to achieve racial and class unity. Even though Rosa's storytelling has the pragmatic purpose to silence rumors of her infidelity to her husband and explain the biological abnormality of two black parents producing a white child, they are ultimately ineffective in convincing her sister Mercedes or Eugenia. This failure of Rosa's false narratives, then, ruptures the hegemony of mestizaje as they cue "some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself" (Bhabha 1984, 127).

By emphasizing the feminine side of the biracial love story instead, Rosa's false narratives point out the glaring omission of women from the discourse of mestizaje. In *Sugar's Secrets*, Vera M. Kutzinski examines a similar exclusion in Cuban literature and culture: "The mulata may be *the* signifier of Cuba's unity-in-racial-diversity, but she has no part in it. For the mestizo nation is a male homosocial construct premised precisely upon the disappearance of the feminine" (1993, 165). As we have seen in previous examples, Rosa and Eugenia are acutely aware of their social exclusion because of race and class, however, their consciousness that they have also been written out of the official discourse of the mestizo nation only becomes apparent through Rosa's stories. In this sense, Rosa's false narratives expose the shortcomings of the mestizo nation's imaginings. The repetition of signifiers, in our case the tragic mulata heroine and the tropes of the biracial love story, are "instances of metonymy" (Bhabha 1984, 130) because "these instances of 'a difference that is almost the same

²¹ Of course, Homi Bhabha is discussing the position of the postcolonial author, while I am analyzing a fictional character. Nevertheless, what Rosa does with her narratives is strikingly similar, although her relationship is with a postcolonial, not a colonial, authority.

but not quite' inadvertently create a crisis for the cultural priority given to the metaphoric as the process of repression and substitution which negotiates the difference between paradigmatic systems and classifications" (130). In other words, with her false narratives, Rosa takes on the very concept of *mestizaje* and its effect on Caribbean society, once again signaling the gulf between the ideal and actual racial practices.

The first false narrative in *Esa esquina del paraíso* is the tale of the white grandmother who "lowered" herself to marry a black man, an inversion of race, class, and gender in not only conquest myths but also in commonly held visions of Afro-Caribbean *mestizaje*. Rather than the relationship between a wealthy white man and a native or Afro-Caribbean woman, Rosa's tale is a biracial love story between a black man from Darién and a high-born white woman who chooses to live with him.²² By placing the white woman in the position typically occupied by the white male, Rosa's story shifts the position of power in the relationship to the feminine half, producing an example of an "almost the same but not quite" mimicry. When compared to an example such as Cuban Nicolás Guillén's poem "El abuelo" (1934), where the black grandfather is seen as crucial (but the grandmother is absent), the implications of Rosa's maternal-centered narrative comes into clearer focus. Guillén's poem ends with a clear reference to how the patriarchal line still manifests itself in the appearance of the white granddaughter: "la dulce sombra oscura del abuelo que huye, / el que rizó por siempre tu cabeza amarilla" (Guillén 2002, 120) [the sweet, dark shadow of your fleeing grandfather / who curled your blond hair for all eternity]. Guillén's purpose in "El abuelo" was to underscore that even the whitest Cubans had African roots, but the poem also clearly states the legacy of patriarchy in that the grandfather's actions have an impact on his granddaughter. In contrast, Rosa's story seems to emphasize the maternal, because supposedly it is the grandmother's actions that result in Eugenia/Jenny's otherwise inexplicable whiteness.

In a similar vein, Rosa's second false narrative, a melodramatic tale of her doomed love affair with Bill, a homesick GI fated to be killed in the Pacific during WWII, shares elements with biracial love stories used to retell the Spanish Conquest. Just as these tales aim to sublimate acts of violence and domination into a more acceptable version of mutual attraction by portraying these relationships in terms of love and romance, Rosa uses a similar narrative to disguise the sordid reality of Eugenia's conception. Essentially, Rosa prostituted herself in order to give birth to a lighter-skinned child, but she relates the incident as an ill-fated romance because Bill died. By borrowing the narrative tropes of the tragic biracial love story, Rosa is able to rewrite a voluntary act of prostitution, a purposeful action to give her a white-skinned child, a "salto adelante," and permit her to live out her dreams of social advancement vicariously.

Regardless of the narrative, what is notable in Rosa's storytelling is how ineffective it is in hiding the details of Eugenia/Jenny's conception, since Mercedes has doubts, and the adult

²² Fanon also draws a clear distinction between the two types of biracial love stories: "Since he is the master and more simply the male, the white man can allow himself the luxury of sleeping with many women. This is true in every country and especially in colonies. But when a white woman accepts a black man, there is automatically a romantic aspect. It is a giving, not a seizing" (1967, 46). What Rosa's false narrative achieves, then, is not only an inversion of the power structure, but a complete change of the main action from seizing to giving.

Eugenia/Jenny easily deconstructs them. For example, early in the play it is Eugenia/Jenny who responds with mockery when the theme of the white grandmother surfaces in a conversation with Rosa:

Perdóname por haber olvidado esa historia. Hacía muchos años que no la sacabas a relucir, Rosa... Pobrecita abuela, la gran dama blanca, debe haberse enmohecido en el closet esperando su turno para salir a desfilas y recordarme que soy el salto adelante.... (Britton 1999, 37)

[Beg your pardon for forgetting that story. It's been a long time since you aired her out. Poor grandma, the great white lady, she must have grown moldy in the closet, waiting for her chance to come out and parade in front of me, reminding me that I am the "leap forward"....]

Later in the play she scrutinizes Rosa's account of Bill and enumerates all the ways such a story could never have taken place by stressing how Rosa's version of events mimics existing discourses:

A ver, dímelo a mí, cara a cara cómo ocurrió ese romance sin palabras entre la dependiente que no hablaba ni papa de inglés y el cliente gringo en pos de la muerte... Cuéntame esa historia de película barata, del romance prohibido entre el gringo y la negra. Yo tengo una explicación más lógica del asunto. No dudo que lo hayas conquistado—por una calle oscura y sin haberlo visto antes como una ramera cualquiera te levantaste la falda. Con ese afán que tenías de mejorar la raza, cualquier pecado estaba permitido... Hasta una levantada de falda. (67)

[Let's see, tell me, face to face how that wordless romance between a shop girl who didn't speak a bit of English and the American customer living in the shadow of death actually took place... Tell me that B-movie plot about an impossible romance between the white man and the black girl. I have a more logical explanation about it. I don't doubt that you sought him out—but on a dark street without getting a good look at him first, just like a common hooker you raised your skirt. With your obsession of improving the race, any sin was permissible... Even lifting your skirt.]

Both quotes emphasize Rosa's failed attempts at mimicry. While the biracial romantic storyline has been employed by the creole elite since the nineteenth century, when Rosa attempts to seize the hegemonic discourse in order to disguise the sordid origins of her own aspiration toward whitening, she is unsuccessful. It is as if the hegemonic discourse is a poor barrier to the unpleasant truths always bubbling below the surface of such appealing, but ultimately false, narratives. In other words, Rosa's "slippage" points to the weakness inherent in the hegemonic biracial love story. While she can be the teller of different tales, and thereby seize agency within a system that excludes her, in the end her narratives fail to complete the function she requires to promote her vision of the past.

The ease with which Eugenia/Jenny destroys Rosa's narrative is significant because, while each story attempts to disguise unequal sexual relationships that give rise to *mestizaje*, it is precisely this

aspect of racial mixing that comes to the forefront through Eugenia/Jenny's mockery. As Kutzinski observes, it is the sexual act that is written out of the *mestizaje* myth: "Once the evidence of messy (that is, sexual) female participation in historical processes of racial mixing is eliminated by being made unrepresentable, *mestizaje* becomes legitimized as an exclusively male project or achievement" (1993, 168). Just as the strength of *mestizaje* rests on downplaying the realities of inequality, racism, and violence necessary to bring racial mixing about in the first place, Rosa's narrative rests on a basic need to obfuscate her acts of prostitution in order to give birth to a light-skinned child. When Rosa actively recasts hegemonic tropes to create her own narrative to legitimize an unsavory past, she is ineffective in seizing the power the narrative should bestow upon her.

Also significant in *Esa esquina del paraíso* is how Rosa's attempts to mimic this hegemonic discourse of *mestizaje* always end in failure. Her inability to wield the dominant discourse, however, should not be considered exclusively in terms of lack of access because of her status as a poor Afro-Panamanian. Rather, it points to intrinsic flaws in the homogenizing project of *mestizaje*, precisely because incorporating *mestizos*, *mulatos*, and the indigenous was never central to its initial conceptualization. The borrowed narratives do not work because they were created for and by a creole elite that had to find a new way of inserting themselves into newly independent republics. The biracial love story and the *mestizaje* foundational fiction myths were central to melding the past and future in such a way that the descendants of conquistadors and *encomenderos* could maintain privilege and power, all the while promoting the appearance of a new type of modern Latin American citizen whose enlightened views on race marked a clear separation from the colonial era.

This failure on the part of Rosa to replicate and successfully utilize the biracial love story to further her interests indicates precisely how this supposedly coalescing concept of *mestizaje* has succeeded in doing just the opposite: excluding rather than including, dividing instead of uniting. Within the confines of their pragmatic goal of marrying up, both Rosa and Eugenia collide with a national imagining founded on a falsehood that they cannot transcend, regardless of their energy, ingenuity, and dedication. *Mestizaje* rules their lives and by extension their destinies. At one point in *Esa esquina del paraíso* an adolescent Eugenia laments: "De una forma u otra, siempre me quedo por fuera..." (24) [One way or another, I'm always on the outside.], a prophetic statement that foreshadows her social limbo at the beginning and end of the play. The adult Jenny fits nowhere: she cannot go back to her origins on Calle Trece, and only prostitution allows her to maintain the trappings of a luxurious lifestyle in a desirable neighborhood. For this reason, condemning both characters for their desires and ambitions to improve their status and escape poverty by the only means available—passing as white in Panamá and the Canal Zone—is to ignore that these protagonists have only inherited, not created, these false imaginings spawned by a creole elite. Essentially, their drive is to partake in the shining promise of the *mestizaje* myth, but Rosa and Eugenia are continually forced to the margins from which they may observe the rewards but never attain them.

Conclusion: Reassessing the Results of Rewriting the Biracial Love Story

This interaction between Rosa and Eugenia, between creating and destroying narratives, reveals the critical stance of *Esa esquina del paraíso* toward the nineteenth century's conceptualization of mestizaje. Rosa constructs her false narratives not only to hide past events but also to give legitimacy to her project of advancing her daughter's prospects in two social spheres where being of mixed-race is a decided disadvantage. Consequently, her narrative actions show how the discourses of mestizaje are inherently "riddled with ambiguities, ambivalence, contradiction, and doubt" (Miller 2004, 6). While Eugenia shares her mother's ambitions for herself, her markedly ironic and critical attitude toward these attempts at legitimacy reveal not only her personal bitterness about her marginalization within both cultures but also the inherent shortcomings in a national imagining built on mestizaje. Unlike her mother, Eugenia has direct experience as the one who never fits in anywhere and is therefore unwilling to accept these pretty stories built upon what Antonio Cornejo-Polar denominates as a "conciliatory and comforting utopia" (1994, 23).

As a result, Eugenia's questioning annihilates the biracial love story, exposing the false narratives that have sustained mestizaje. It is significant that Eugenia/Jenny, who cannot change how each society positions mixed-race individuals, is the one who revolts against the hegemonic discourse in the only way open to her—by destroying Rosa's stories. This act signals that she is still incapable of changing her fate, despite her superior knowledge about race and class, her ability to manipulate two societies into thinking she is white, and her advantages in education and opportunities. Yes, she manages to leave Calle Trece, but her personal prison ends up being not that different from her sister Clotilde's because both have nowhere else to go.

Rather than adopting Fanon's misogynistic stance, which condemns mixed race women for attempting to improve their social and economic standing by manipulating racial prejudice to their individual advantage, *Esa esquina del paraíso* opens the mestizaje debate into different territories. Unlike nineteenth century tropes, Rosa and Eugenia/Jenny are not victims, but agents who attempt to alter their lives while living in an inherently unfair society based on mestizaje ideals. Even though their rewritings of the tragic mulata heroine and the romantic biracial love stories present a significant shift that confers them agency and favors a woman-centered perspective, the play highlights the extent to which a superior understanding of circumstances and rhetoric does not alter the mixed-race individual's circumstances, since the way to privilege and opportunity are just as barred as before. Rather than altering the course of their lives, rewriting narratives only serves to clarify how that corner of paradise will always remain just beyond their reach. The tragedy for Eugenia/Jenny and Rosa is that they realize too late that their actions of rewriting romance only allowed them to attain a perch from which to better appreciate the tantalizing rewards they were never destined to attain.

Frances Jaeger is Associate Professor in the Department of World Languages and Cultures, Northern Illinois University. Her articles have appeared in *Casa de las Américas*, *Revista Iberoamericana*, *Hispanic Journal*, *Isnto*, and *Explicación de textos literarios*, as well as other venues in the US and Latin America. Her research interests focus on Central America and the Caribbean. Currently she is preparing a critical anthology of the poetry of Ana María Rodas.

References

Anderson, Benedict

1996 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.

Andrews, George Reid

2004 *Afro-Latin America, 1800–2000*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Barrow, Alberto

1991 “Racism Was Central to the Invasion.” In *The U.S. Invasion of Panama. The Truth Behind Operation “Just Cause,”* edited by the Independent Commission of Inquiry on the U.S. Invasion of Panama, 81–83. Boston: South End Press.

Bhabha, Homi

1984 “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” *October* 28: 125–133. doi: [10.2307/778467](https://doi.org/10.2307/778467).

Biesanz, John y Mavis

1993 *Panamá y sus gentes*. 1955. 2ª ed. Panamá: Editorial Universitaria.

Bost, Suzanne

2003 *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850–2000*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.

Britton, Rosa María

1999 *Esa esquina del paraíso*. 1986. In *Teatro*, 7–73. Panamá: Editorial Mariano Arosemena.

Bryce-Laporte, R. S.

1998 “Crisis, Contraculture, and Religion among West Indians in the Panama Canal Zone.” In *Blackness in Latin American and the Caribbean. Social Dynamics and Cultural Transformations. Vol. 1. Central American and Northern and Western South America*, edited by Norman E. Whitten, Jr., and Arlene Torres, 100–118. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Cornejo-Polar, Antonio
1994 "The Multiple Voices of Latin American Literature." Morrison Library Inaugural Address Series 1. Berkeley: University of California Press. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7kh5r6xz>
- Daniel, Lee A.
2000 "Entrevista a Rosa María Britton." *Mester* 29: 182–191. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8nf8082z>
- Fanon, Frantz
1967 *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Weidenfeld.
- Guillén, Nicolás
2002 "El abuelo." 1934. *Obra poética*, Tomo 1, edited by Ángel Augier. La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas.
- Halperín Donghi, Tulio
2003 "Argentine Counterpoint: Rise of the Nation, Rise of the State." In *Beyond Imagined Communities: Reading and Writing the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, edited by Sara Castro-Klarén and John Charles Chasteen, 33–53. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Kutzinski, Vera M.
1993 *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- López Cruz, Humberto
1999 "Rosa María Britton: nuevo perfil de la literatura panameña." *Confluencia* 15(1): 121–126.
- McCullough, David
1977 *The Path between the Seas: The Creation of the Panama Canal 1870-1914*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Miller, Marilyn Grace
2004 *Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race: The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Phaf, Ineke
1985 "Women and Literature in the Caribbean." In *Unheard Words: Women and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America*, edited by Mineke Schipper, translated by Barbara Potter Fasting, 168–200. London: Allison and Busby.
- Priestley, Georges, and Alberto Barrow
2010 "El movimiento negro en Panamá: una interpretación histórica y política, 1994–2004." In *Política e identidad afrodescendientes en México y América Central*, edited by Odile Hoffman, 129–156. México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- Sommer, Doris
1991 *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Villaverde, Cirilo

1979 *Cecilia Valdés*. 1839. México: Porrúa.

Westerman, George W.

1980 *Los inmigrantes antillanos en Panamá*. Panamá: INAC.