

The Creole Poets of Nicaragua: A Poetry Selection

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To write about the literature produced by the Afro-descendants of Nicaragua is a difficult task, in part because it is not known what percentage of the Nicaraguan population descends from the African diaspora.

The researcher then has to decide who should be included as Afro-descendant. Should Rubén Darío, Nicaragua's greatest poet and one of the most important poets of the Spanish language, qualify? In his prologue to his book *Prosas profanas y otros poemas*, he said that it was very likely that he had what he called "African blood." And how about Luis Alberto Cabrales, Carlos Bravo, and Alejandro Bravo? This group perhaps provides us with the criteria that can be used to say who the Afro-descendants of Nicaragua are: the descendants of the African diaspora who identify themselves as Afro-descendants.

Here I will present a selection of poetry written by the largest Afro-descendant community in Nicaragua - the Creoles.¹ Although they are racially mixed, the Creoles recognize themselves, and are recognized by others, as Afro-descendants.²

A history of the Creole population of Nicaragua is beyond the scope of this introduction, but to understand why their poetry is not well known nationally and internationally is necessary to provide a brief historical background.³ The origin of the Creole population dates back to the eighteenth century - or, at least, the origin of a Creole identity. Edmund T. Gordon argues that a distinct Creole identity and politics emerged during this period.

In the eighteenth century the British established some settlements on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. With the 1783 Treaty of Versailles and the 1786 Convention of London, the British government agreed to give this territory to Spain and to dismantle these settlements. When England left, some of the English remained,

¹ For this reason they will be known here as the Creole poets.

² See Edmund T. Gordon's *Disparate Diasporas: Identity and Politics in an African-Nicaraguan Community*.

³ Edmund T. Gordon's book mentioned above is the best available on this subject.

especially a settler named Robert Hodgson, Jr., who stayed with his slaves and offered his services to the Spanish crown. Once in control of the territory, the Spanish tried to subordinate the population of the Caribbean Coast but the people resisted and eventually defeated the Spanish. Although Robert Hodgson, Jr., who became the Spanish governor, left Nicaragua for Guatemala, some of his slaves remained and they became the nucleus from which the Creole population grew.

With the Spanish gone, many years of self-government ensued. Trading tortoiseshells, lumber, and other products with the rest of the Caribbean, the group that is known as the Creoles today became relatively prosperous, and grew as a result of both natural growth and immigration. The community developed its own culture: crafts, painting, sculpture, dance, music, food, and storytelling. Influenced by the English and independent from the Nicaraguan Mestizo culture, they developed into a large and distinct ethnic community.

English, or a dialect of it named Creole English, became their native language. Creole English remained as a living, functioning language not only because the Creoles originated when the English settled this part of Nicaragua, but also because England practically only abandoned this region in 1894, when the Caribbean Coast was annexed to Nicaragua. Later, the churches and some American companies that invested in banana, lumber, and mining helped to keep the language alive. It was the language of church, business, and everyday life.

And this fact, language, has been one of the most important obstacles that the Creole poets have had to face. A nationalistic leader, the liberal José Santos Zelaya, who tried to build a nation-state under one government, one market, and one language, carried out the annexation of the Caribbean Coast to Nicaragua. His government banned the use of English in the schools, which had to be closed temporarily because there were not enough teachers fluent in Spanish in the region. Since the annexation to Nicaragua, the language of government and education on the Caribbean Coast has been Spanish. Even today, no national magazine or newspaper would publish texts in English, which is another obstacle that the Creole poets have had to face. This policy of assimilation to the Mestizo majority marginalized, and marginalizes, the Creole population.

In addition, the Creole poets have had to face other obstacles such as which dialect of English to use: Creole or Standard English. Creole English, of course, has a limited audience and has no standard spelling.

It is not surprising then that the first Creole poets who achieved national recognition wrote in Spanish. David McField and Carlos Rigby, whose native language is Creole English, achieved national recognition in the late 1960s. As we will see in the selection included here, they wrote in Spanish but sprinkled their poems with some verses in English, both Creole and Standard. Promoted by Pablo Antonio Cuadra, the most important mentor and publisher of Nicaraguan literature in the twentieth century,

they published in the most important literary magazines in the country, *La Prensa Literaria* and *El Pez y la Serpiente*.

McField and Rigby wrote in the 1960s, during the period known in Nicaraguan history as the Somoza dictatorship, and their poetry was known as a poetry of protest. The poems included here are representative of their poetry, in the sense that they are, like most of their poems, about social injustice and racial identity.

In the 1980s, as a result of the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution, which unleashed a debate about racial and ethnic identities and promoted poetry as an art that could be produced by the masses, a new group of poets achieved national and local recognition. Two of them, June Beer and Ronald Brooks Saldaña, are included in the poetry selection below. June Beer had been writing poetry since the 1960s but she wrote in Creole English and was not known as a poet in Nicaragua. Like McField and Rigby, who belonged to her generation, she also wrote about life under the Somoza dictatorship and the Sandinista Revolution. Ronald Brooks, on the other hand, even though he was actively involved in the struggle against the Somoza dictatorship, wrote more about love, art, and domestic life. He wrote in Spanish and in Standard English, and the poems included here are a good example of the topics he covered in his poetry.

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, a new group of Creole poets has appeared on the scene. This new generation is best exemplified by Yolanda Rossman, Deborah Robb, Annette Fenton, and Andira Watson. Freed from the Somoza dictatorship and the conflicts of the 1980s, this generation's topics are more diverse. As can be seen in this selection, they write about issues of racial and ethnic identity, but also about love, death, and dreams.

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June Beer (1935-1986) was the director of the public library in Bluefields, Nicaragua. She was an accomplished painter and a poet who wrote in Creole English. Her poetry has appeared in several anthologies and magazines.

CHUNKA FAAM

Mango, rosaapple, cashu,
 Lime, plum, breadfruit,
 Cassava, coco, dashin,
 Yampi, coconut, plaantin
 A little a dis a little of dat
 We go from year to year so.
 Se picninny gettin big
 Dem shud go to school.
 Book, pencil, pants, shuts, shoes—
 Oh laad how we gon mek it.
 Maybe we euda boro money fron de bank,
 John she to Mary on de chunku faam up Black Wata Crik.

John, me fraid se no unnastan dem ting
 But wen a look at dese picninny
 A half to try fa dem
 Se les go town wit we regista pepa.
 John an Mary visit de banka,
 A ducko man wit a slipry smile
 Who talk like paña playin yanky.
 Zhes, we have a program foar
 People like you —estep over
 To Mr. Wilson, he will attend you.

Wilson ass dis an ‘e ass dat
 Den ‘e tel me Sunday ‘e goin visit we ‘paan de faam
 An ‘e did.
 He she de loan sure
 In 15 days we mus go to de bank.
 But wen we gone to de bank
 Only halkf wat we ass, we get.
 I tek it an I try, laad in heven know I try—
 I try fa de little picninny
 Fa dem to go to school
 But dat banka wit de slipry smile

Give me jus enough money to put me in de hole
An tek meh faam.

LOVE POEM

Oscar, yuh surprise me,
Assin far a love poem. Ah sing a song a love fa me contry
Small contry, big lite
Hope fad a po', big headache fa de rich.
Mo' po' dan rich in de worl
Mo' people love fa meh contry.
Fa meh contry name Nicaragua
Fa meh people ah love dem all
Black, Miskito, Sumu, Rama, Mestizo.

So yuh see fa me,
love poem complete 'cause ah love you too.

David Mcfield (1936) is the author of the following books: *Dios es negro* (1967), *En la calle de enmedio* (1968), *Poemas para el año del elefante* (1970), *Poemas populares* (1972), and *Las veinticuatro* (1975). He is the current Nicaraguan ambassador in Jamaica.

BLACK IS BLACK

Black is Black.
 Ser negro da lo mismo,
 en cualquier latitud
 black is black.
 Si no que lo digan,
 las magníficas actuaciones de Sidney Poitier,
 los formidables músculos de Jim Brown,
 Caupolicán moderno,
 o Lotario, fiel como el golpe que asesta a los enemigos
 de Mandrake.
 No es cuestión de alma blanca.
 Porque negro es negro,
 black is black,
 full time:
 por dentro y por fuera.
 Negro en los muelles de New York,
 en Old Bank,
 en los algodones de Atlanta,
 en Vietnam, Laos y Camboya,
 en el Madison Square Garden.
 Negros, sudando de ambición,
 en las olimpiadas mundiales
 "dándole colorido al espectáculo"
 Pelé, Pelé, Pelé
 y "el negrito del batey"
 "y los demás en tantos climas son"
 negros simplemente.
 Black is black
 Pero
 "give me a chance
 make a raise a rass".
 "Give me a chance".

Ronald Brooks Saldaña (1943-2001) was the director of the Bilingual Program at the Ministry of Education in Bluefields and wrote textbooks in English and Spanish for elementary and secondary schools. His poetry has been published in several anthologies and magazines.

IT HAD TO HAPPEN

Well,
it had to happen some day
that's all.

But spring has always followed winter,
and tears can turn to rain
to grow the newly baby buds
that sprout on fertile fields.

Daybreak always follows sunset
and surely then as now
the splendid rivers wild will run
and clouds will dress in gold.

Clinging lazily to branches
the chrysalises smoothly sleep
in gray or dark unconscious dreaming
they dream the saddest dreams,
but then as crowds of happy rainbows
the butterflies will fly
defeating skies with wings of colors
prismers no more.

For,
in a world of dreams and reality,
who dreams forever?

In a world of life and sorrows,
tell me,
who mourns forever?

In a world of tears and laughter,
please tell me,
who cries forever?

In a world of light and darkness,
 please, please tell me,
 who's blind forever?

It had to happen someday
 that's all.

SINCOPADO

Una gota
 un chorro
 una fuente
 un arroyo
 un río
 una bahía
 un mar
 un océano.

una roca. Una gota
 una nube. Una gota
 una tormenta. Una gota
 un océano. Una gota

un mar. Una bahía
 una gota
 un río. Un arroyo
 una gota
 una fuente. Un chorro
 una gota
 una tristeza infinita
 una lágrima.

Carlos Rigby (1935) is a charismatic poet who has dedicated his life to performing his poems in public. He has published in many magazines and has been included in many anthologies of Nicaraguan poetry.

NICARIBE SOY

Yo soy de Nicaragua—
Nicaribe soy...

:yo como mi ron-down
 patti ron-down
 pan de coco patti
como comida —no como mierda
como que como comida no como mierda
desde el 19 de Julio del “79
se me compuso mi hambre & sed de justicia
tremenda justicia y libertad—
¿quién no ha comido...?

:no solamente de pan vivo yo
yo como chacalín langosta pescado y
cangrejo
mix-up sea-soup—
 :pedazos de langosta
 pedazos de pescado
 camarones y chelines enterones
 y punche de cangrejo the crab-soup
ay mi tropicaldo

se me liberaron mis esclavos —no
los esclavos se liberaron—
:y erase en Corn Island en Nicaragua
en el mundo en mis gentes
 :y bailamos y cantamos
 en Tropical Reggae
 te danzamos además en tropicaldo
ay mi gravy mi caldo mi caldo—
 tropicaldo
 mi tropical gravy
yo como

como toda esta comida
 y como más—
 yo no como que como que come
 como de verdad
 yo no como de mentira
 o partes en sí
 pero eso sí –sí como:
 como patti ron-down
 pan de coco patti
 como arroz a-la-chacalinada—

mamaaá: rice & shrimp
 mi fell full
 mi fell full full full
 :things that fill
 I tak me my
 Daily spirit
 And mouldy bread

But a eat –eso sí
 como –y no como mierda
 desde el 19 de Julio del ‘79

Yo sacié mi sed de hambre y justicia
 dándole duro
 con el ron-down etc. etc.

Mirá yo sé caminar sobre las aguas
 sin mojarme los pies
 y lo hago mejor todavía en panga o pipante
 dory o canoa
 qué más da –pues nosotros sí nos damos
 el lujo de volver a caminar sobre las aguas
 sin mojarnos los pies

:yo tengo la boca
 que me queda
 algo grandecita
 pero Buena:
 la lengua me la tengo viperina
 cuando serpientes & manzanas

yo soy de Nicaribia
nicaribe soy

y no llevo el viento en mis ojos
ni las nubes en mi cabeza
hace rato que yo me bajé de mi nube
y lloví—

& lloví & lloví & lloví—
hasta que lloví

desde entonces yo sé cómo como yo
todo el mundo ha de saber cómo como yo
yo no como que como que como mierda
como de verdad
y no solo de pan vivo yo
a diario
yo me tiro mi espíritu de todos los días

INCLUYENDO

mi pan mohoso cotidiano
pero como
mejor dicho: tengo mi esqueleto
que me queda grande
como quien dice:
tengo mis huesos aceitados
con aceite de coco
mi andar rítmico
tiene mucho de palmera
ola viento altas alas
salta olas y el brinquete
al andar

Pies que caminan ahora
tranquilamente
sin mojarse
porque ya no como —por fin
sacé mi hambre & sed de justicia
un 19 de Julio del '79
y aunque comer un tiempo en Revolución
es comer y vivir por siempre en Revolución
nicaribe soy
y en mí todo se encuentra el luchar

En mi ser este rítmico andarme
 así & acá
 de allá y para acá
 etc. etc. etc.
 en la licuefacción de mis días
 y la solidificación de mis noches
 en Nicaribia en Nicaragua
 en el mundo de nosotros
 por Dios que yo sé caminar sobre las aguas
 sin mojarme los pies

adentro de mi sangre llevo el mar—

saladita la rojona
 en mis ojos la carga
 a veces se me derrama.

SI YO FUERA MAYO

Si todos los sucesos del calendario
 fuese sim-sáima-sima-ló con hojas caídas
 y
 un negrito y una negrita
 serpenteando la cadera
 hacia la madrugada
 con o sin luna
 sobre el techo del mundo
 al son del "zopilote"
 que desenvaina
 su yarda y media
 contra la hija
 de doña media y shique shaque shiqui shaque
 repujando repujando y repujando
 hasta que.." entonces tendríamos razón suficiente
 para contemplar las cosas
 desde el ángulo patas-arriba
 del murciélago
 colgado desde el cielo-raso del universo
 cargado de días incluyendo también
 el del primero de mayo

en todo el mundo:
con desfiles
carteles
portadores de carteles
manifestantes
las palabras manifestadas
las palabras piedrafectadas
pero desoídas desamadas descachimbadas
dentro del orgullo
de tantos trabajadores
que aunque siendo tales
no todos comen pan
ni sudan de la frente
ni tendrán un aumento de sueldo
ni mucho menos nuevas promociones
hacia el antiguo oficio de hacer dinero
dentro de las marchas y protestas
por máyaya lasique má-yaya-o
con los pies de los policías
bailando sin querer: sin-sáima-sima-ló
entonces yo bailarí
contento
en el centro de la rueda de mayo
con mi danza haciéndose agua
y mi soledad
una con las lluvias de la primavera
ya por fin entendido en lo verde
comprendiendo la voz del pueblo
-que es la voz de Dios-
gritando desde lo alto de un palodemayo:
máyaya lasique máyaya-ooo

Yolanda Rossman (1961) has published the following books: *Lágrimas sobre el musgo* (2008) and *Nocturnidad del trópico* (2010).

RAÍCES

Mi abuela materna
 Dulce mujer RAMA de hipnótica cabellera,
 El retumbar de tambores ancestrales
 Aún en su pecho,
 Se juntó enamorada
 A robusto mestizo chontaleño
 Donde los ríos son de leche
 Y las piedras cuajadas.

Mi abuela paterna
 Ardiente mujer KRIOL,
 Con un toque de NAGA
 Mágica, poderosa,
 Hizo sucumbir
 Con su inquietante aroma a flores,
 Al ojiazul emigrante alemán,
 Venido del viejo continente.

Soy crisol,
 Soy amalgama,
 Sangre, lengua, piel

SOY MUJER DEL CARIBE!

MAIRIN

Sobre el extenso lienzo de mi piel
 se asoman risueños,
 todos los matices de Gaia,
 iridiscencia expandiendo
 un murmullo insistente
 de lenguas antiguas
 las ancestras me hablan...
 mairin, woman.. yal...

Sí, soy mujer multicolor...
el ritmo de cocoteros
cimbreado en su andar,
con un exquisito jadeo de olas
en el pecho amante.
En su vientre de playas infinitas
el sol seducido
arde en su centro,
donde el placer aguarda,
anidando en el húmedo
laberinto de las caracolas.
Sí, hombre caribe
de mirada oriental,
soy la alquimia perfecta
para apaciguar tu hombría.

Deborah Robb (1965) writes in English and has published poetry in magazines and has been included in several anthologies. She published a book of non-fiction entitled *The Times and Life of Bluefields* (2005).

KILLING TIME

When the night intrudes boorishly rude,
totally and completely both stale and barren,
death will show up then, prancing and dancing
with all the grace —of an eel on heels... foolish and useless.

PIÑATA DE AGUA

En esta hora
octava del día
una duna
de nubes negras
dora su espalda al sol
y la brisa temprana
sosiega por esta barrera
que no es ni
casi tan intangible
mientras la luz
abierta se curva dócil,
dócil
hacia el océano
afuera del mundo
y cada flor,
cada hoja,
suspira temblorosa
expectativa.
Sin prisa
llueve
y
llueve
un día
como
nieve
hasta que
escampa

y
el jardín amanece
con más de alguna
hoja,
flor,
o semilla
de goma o
todavía
de fiesta.
El sacuanjoche
pide perdón
por sus huesos
grises y descarnados.
El tronco
de un crotón
de antaño podado
sangra ahora
frescos
tornasoles.
Las musas
tul
cuelgan
velludas,
hinchadas,
y sinvergüenzas.
Los lirios
coloridos
se confunden
en su propio
lánguido
delirio.
Las rosas
sin pudor
igualitas
trepan,
se enredan,
al toque mas leve
se deshacen y
conmueven.
Los postes
del cercado

revientan
como bananos
requete
maduros
en un exagerado
floreado
de chillos, chichas
púrpuras,
liláceas y hot pinks
mientras
dos gigantes
de la orilla vigilia
se incendian
naranjas
sólo
un poquito
less gay.
Los hibiscos
en huipil
despliegan bragas arrugadas y ondean nerviosos pistilos.
Una
heliconia, inflorescente
al amparo de palmas,
allamandas y
morning glories,
parece ella
sola
totalmente
sobria.
Ni parpadea.
Sus pétalos,
pendientes plásticos,
insensibles
cuentan
gotas.

Annette Fenton (1973) writes in English, and is very active in the local poetry scene in Bluefields, Nicaragua. Her poetry has been included in several anthologies.

POEM XII

I have climbed aboard another dream...

With hands over crinkled brows mid the grey and darkness
I peer into the unseen with the hope of light
amid the gloom to aid my failing sight.

I can't tell whether it's a spiritual or mystical experience
Or perhaps both, but I know for sure that
I have climbed aboard another dream;
and though I know not where I am drifting
I have acquired new strenght in my being.
Sometimes when I look at myself,
I can see a smile that's hesitant
portraying all I want, the beauty I have envision
the fear that's drifting further down the streams of despair.

Looking a little deeper I sense,
an extremely imaginative yet sensitive being
Whose brain, heart, flesh and bone
like porous matter absorbs it all;
The love, the pain, the feelings that sustain.

I turn away with a vague sense of time and
coherence merging yet slipping away from me,
and I caught the vulnerability which glows like oil on my skin,
and I am amazed that such a thin layer can protect;

and then I feel it: SLAM! An extraordinary emotional charge,
the part of me that helps me face life's trials and uncertainties,
gives me confidence, let me know my compassionate nature,
my kindness, my enormous intuitiveness, my capability
of love for others, and... my remorse,
my will to grudge my hostile nature... my imperfectness.

My assertiveness, where I stand firm for things of hierarchy
for practical things with feet well placed I hold my ground

like plants of fertile land,
 there is a lot to discover I know,
 and my spiritual revolution is a journey just began
 where my best attitude to life is attained.

And I found as I searched a little further that...
 From the inside looking out I'll be dreaming,
 from the outside looking in at the visions trap within I'll see
 that it's just me awakening to an all new dream.

POEM XXII

I have found a special place in my dreams where to reside
 to be vague, and satisfied
 that is the place where I crawl to when I am weak,
 where I can feel my ebbing strength redeemed

It is where my utmost dreams can come true
 where there is no hurting time
 no condemned thoughts
 no words worth lying
 no fists are flying

There is no space for hate,
 there is no burning anger
 no lingering hunger
 no missing words in a poet's verse.

Yes, I have found a special place where to reside
 and when I am awake I can always find my nook in time.
 I love that quiet corner where silence accepts what we bring
 and gives back what we need with a sigh.
 My quiet corner where most of my golden moments are forged,
 where I find that I am more than I know,
 where I am honest with myself, where for a moment
 my defects by adjuration are exorcised.

Andira Watson (1977) won the Mariana Sansón Argüello Poetry Prize in 2009. Her books include *Más excelsa que Eva* (2002) and *En la Casa de Ana los Árboles no Tienen culpa* (2009). She writes the blog www.andirawatson.blogspot.com

HIJO

“Me parece que mi niño es un palomo de lumbre
que él me deslizó por la oreja”.
Yerma, Federico García Lorca
Grillos nocturnos titilan en mi vientre,
deseos de ser como la tierra,
Yerma descalza en búsqueda del secreto conjuro
de las paridoras...
–Mi niño es un palomo de lumbre que él me deslizó por la oreja–.
No sé quién es,
pero anda necio, intranquilo rondándome.
Dormida me saca de entre mis sábanas
para tocar mis pechos
que se crispan ateridos por el aire matutino
–mi niño quiere lumbre–;
y anclar en este fuego que quema su olor de brasa
calladamente,
sobre el que hierve humilde solitaria herrumbre,
platinegro hollín,
mil veces encendido y apagado
sobre este espeso, caliente
amor.
Te di a luz
porque mi necesidad de amar
fue más grande que todos los escrúpulos.

COMO DUENDE

Sin campanitas en los zapatos,
suavecito,
con astucia felina en las tardes de sol,
como el frijol mágico de Jack...
Así trepaba tu padre por mis silencios
y me besaba las piernas.

Presencia

Te dejaré la música en mi ausencia,
para que aprehenda a los silencios
la melodía;
dejaré el armónico reloj acompasado
para que te colmen de mí.
Porque siempre inundaré de susurros lo que oigas
para que la palabra sea en verdad
lo último de mí que pierdas,
Éste será mi poder frente a la muerte.