# Expanding Definitions of Caribbean Identity through Contemporary Panamanian Fiction by Melanie Taylor Herrera

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**Abstract:** Contemporary black female Hispanic Caribbean writers deal with race and gender differently from their literary predecessors. Born in 1972 in Panama City, Panama, Melanie Taylor Herrera is a black female Caribbean writer who is conscious of her racial identity yet is neither defined nor limited by it. Unlike the black female Cuban poet Nancy Morejón who declared both her race and gender in her 1975 seminal poem "Mujer negra" or "Black Woman," Taylor Herrera's short stories distance themselves from an exclusively racialized discourse but continue being informed by it. While Morejón identifies as both female and black, Taylor Herrera identifies as an urban woman defined by contemporary issues that affect women of African and non-African descent. Thus, the characters who populate her fiction display concerns of modern women such as motherhood, divorce, isolation, solitude, and suicide. In the second decade of the 21st century, Taylor Herrera's racial and gender identification underscore the multifaceted identity of the Caribbean woman in her quest to distinguish herself in an urban, cosmopolitan, and globalized society. The following analysis proposes to assay Taylor Herrera's short story collections *Camino a Mariato* [Walk to Mariato, 2009], *Amables predicciones* [Friendly Predictions, 2005] and *Tiempos acuáticos* (Aquatic Times, 2000) with the aim to conceptualize the redefinition of the Afra-Panamanian woman in the current century.

**Keywords**: Afra-Panamanian, isolation, solitude, suicide, black, identity, race, Hispanic Caribbean women

In *Daughters of the Diaspora: Afra-Hispanic Writers*, Miriam DeCosta-Willis noted that, "One of the most important social and political questions that Caribbean and Latin American writers of African descent raise is that of race: "What does it mean to be a negra or mestiza or mulata in a country that defends and validates European colonization and acculturation?" (xxii). Although this may define the consciousness of the generation of Afra-Hispanic writers born during the thirties and forties of the previous century such as Nancy Morejón (Cuba 1944), Georgina Herrera (1936), Excilia Saldaña (1946-1999), and Eulalia Bernard (Costa Rica 1935), it does not necessarily define the literature of contemporary Afra-Latin American writers born after 1970 such as Melanie Taylor Herrera. In a 2013 interview, Afra-Panamanian short story writer and poet Melanie Taylor Herrera revealed:

> "Soy una mujer urbana, hija de los logros del feminismo del siglo XX, afro y consciente de serlo pero no circunscribo mi escritura a temas afros ni a temas de denuncia social ni siquiera a temas exclusivamente panameños"
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> [I am an urban woman, daughter of the achievements of twentieth-century feminism, black and aware of it, but I do not restrict my writing to black themes or themes of social criticism or even exclusively Panamanian topics] (Watson, "Entrevista a Melanie" 2013).

Born in 1972 in Panama City, Panama, Taylor Herrera is a black female Caribbean writer who is conscious of her racial identity yet is neither defined nor limited by it. Unlike the black female Cuban poet Nancy Morejón who declared both her race and gender in her 1975 seminal poem "Mujer negra" [Black Woman], Taylor Herrera's short stories distance themselves from an exclusively racialized discourse but continue being informed by it. While Morejón identifies as both female and black, Taylor Herrera identifies as an urban woman defined by contemporary issues that affect women of African and non-African descent.[1] Thus, the characters who populate her fiction display concerns of modern women such as motherhood, divorce, isolation, solitude, and suicide. In the second decade of the 21st century, Taylor Herrera's racial and gender identification underscore the multifaceted identity of the Caribbean woman in her quest to distinguish herself in an urban, cosmopolitan, and globalized society. The following analysis proposes to assay Taylor Herrera's short story collections *Tiempos acuáticos* (Aquatic Times, 2000), *Amables predicciones* [Friendly Predictions, 2005], and *Camino a Mariato* [Walk to Mariato, 2009] with the aim to conceptualize the redefinition of the Afra-Panamanian/Caribbean woman in the current century. Her short stories announce issues that women living in an urban, isolated, and enclosed society face such as solitude, silence, alienation, and suicide. On the one hand, these themes are universal ones that populate the texts of women writers. On the other, Taylor Herrera's works "question femininity and women's traditional roles in patriarchal societies;[and] examine the effect that silence, isolation, and invisibility have on female agency and creativity…", a tenet also common in works written by Hispanic writers of African descent (DeCosta Willis, xxv). Themes of silence, isolation, and invisibility are not only inherent in Afr*a*-Latin American literature but also populate the fiction of Latin American women writers of non-African descent. Thus, Taylor Herrera's fiction dovetails with that of female writers throughout the Diaspora.

[1] It is not my intention to homogenize or essentialize Nancy Morejón's literary repertoire. It is important to note that her fiction not only treats themes that deals with race and/or gender. Her poetry and essays span the gamut and deal with a plethora of issues such as motherhood, sexuality, national identity, etc.

It is worth mentioning that Taylor Herrera's choice not to write about race or ethnicity in her works is nothing new in Latin American and Hispanic Caribbean literature. In fact, in the past many writers of color avoided the topic of race all together essentially writing themselves out of blackness. This erasure, denial, or negation dates back to the 16th century. In "Literary Whiteness and the Afro-Hispanic Difference," José Piedra noted that Spanish-speaking writers of African descent, such as Spain's Juan Latino (1518-1596), constantly equivocated between "writing white" to avoid racial identification and writing for their country of origin. Expressing racial awareness in their writings was extremely problematic because "[n]onwhites could write as long as they did not address the issue of difference" (312). Thus, many Afro-Hispanic writers chose a national affiliation by avoiding racial identification in their writings. However, while many avoided issues of racial identity or prejudice, others indirectly contested the system of rhetorical whiteness by employing parody or satire to exhibit their frustration with the dominant culture. Literary whiteness spread to the New World where Afro-Hispanic writers repressed a black consciousness in favor of a homogeneous nationalistic one. Piedra notes that Afro-Peruvian writer José Manuel Valdés (1767-1843), for example, "wrote himself out of blackness by assuming an invisible self even when he addressed issues of marginality" (315). In Panama, early twentieth-century national poet Gaspar Octavio Hernández (1893-1918) wrote about race ambiguously and denied his blackness by elevating whiteness through a *modernista* aesthetic. For example, in his personal homage "Ego Sum" [I am], Hernández describes his blackness by utilizing terms in opposition to whiteness:

Ni tez de nácar, ni cabellos de oro
veréis ornar de galas mi figura;
ni la luz del afir, celeste y pura,
veréis que en mis pupilas atesoro.
Con piel tostada de atezado moro;
con ojos negros de fatal negrura,
del Ancón a la falda verde oscura
nací frente al Pacífico sonoro.

[Neither pearly skin, nor golden hair
will you see adorns my countenance to the finest;
neither sapphire's light, celestial and pure
in my eyes you will see that I treasure].
For I was born with skin of Moorish blacks,
with black eyes of fatal blackness, upon
the dark green hillside of Ancón,
I was born against the sonorous Pacific].
(Miró, *Cien años* 187)

Hernández describes himself not only as black, but it is a fatal blackness. He establishes the white/black, pure/unpure, and light/dark dichotomy with the contrast between the "pearly skin/dark skin" [tez de nácar /piel tostada] and "celestial eyes/black eyes" [ojos celestiales/ojos negros]. Although he identifies as black in this poem, it is with reluctance and in relation to not being white. This black denial and desire for whiteness is also evidenced in the works of early twentieth-century female writers from the Caribbean. Puerto Rican poet Carmen Colón Pellot (1911-2001) exclaimed in the 1938 poem, "Ay, señor que yo quiero ser blanca!," [Oh, Lord I want to be White] a desire to be "rubia y blanca/como la espuma/como la charca/como las flores/de los naranjos/ de mis montañas"[blond and white/like the pond, like the flowers/of the orange trees/of my mountains] (45). In "Ay, señor", the white woman and by extension whiteness, is associated with virginity, beauty, and purity. The imagery of nature and the white cloud aesthetic express the poet-speaker's desire to be white and most importantly the liberty that whiteness advantages. Colón Pellot expressed ambivalence and ambiguity about her blackness and simultaneously embraced and rejected it while professing a *mulata* identity. This can be understood given the national climate of Puerto Rico during the 1930s. This was a time when the nation wanted to express its Hispanic identity in light of U.S. imperialism after the United States' acquisition of the country in 1898. Thus, Colón Pellot felt the need to downplay her *mulata* identity in favor of a homogeneous white Hispanic Puerto Rican one[2].

Unlike these writers who professed denial, racial ambivalence, or flat out negation of blackness, Taylor Herrera is comfortable with her black identity. She openly acknowledges and embraces it. Above all, as she once noted, "I consider myself to be a human being." (Watson, "Entrevista a Melanie Taylor" 2003). Indeed, she identifies as a modern urban woman which is reflected in her short story collections analyzed below.

## Black women's writing in Panama

For the most part, until Taylor Herrera[3] began publishing in 2000, Black women's writing in Panama has been limited to works by writers of West Indian ancestry who profess their blackness above their gender and Panamanian national

[2] During the 1930s, Puerto Rico experienced a period of late nationalism based on the recreation of a Hispanicized identity after the United States acquired the nation in 1898 due to the Spanish American War (1898). Several intellectuals during this period promoted a Puerto Rican national identity based on the nation's *jíbaro* or indigenous roots while excluding the black population in a reconceptualization of its national identity. For example, Antonio Pedreira's widely read racist text *Insularismo* (1934) excluded the black Puerto Rican population and advocated for a homogeneous one that did not take into account the nation's black population.

[3] Taylor Herrera has both West Indian and Afro-Colonial ancestry.

identity. One of the most well-known female writers of African descent in Panama is Melva Lowe de Goodin, a Panamanian of West Indian ancestry. As one of Panama's few published West-Indian female writers, Melva Lowe de Goodin not only fills a void in the field of Afro-Panamanian literature but also one in the field of literature written by Afra-Panamanians. In *Afrodescendientes en el Istmo de Panamá 1501-2012* [Afro-descendants in the Isthmus of Panamá 1501-2012], a biographical and historical compilation of Afro-descendants in Panama, Lowe de Goodin notes the dearth of information on the historical contributions of women of African descent in the Panamanian Isthmus (67). However, Lowe de Goodin is not merely concerned with representing women of color in Panama; she explores the lives of all Panamanian West Indians in her writings. She entered the literary sphere with the publication of, *De/From Barbados a/to Panamá* [From Barbados to Panama 1999], a historical drama that reconstructs the migration of West-Indian immigrants in 1909 to the Isthmus during the construction of the Panama Canal. In *De/From Barbados*, Lowe de Goodin resurrects the forgotten story of West-Indian Canal workers that is absent from Panamanian national history. This play promotes ethnic awareness and pride of a population (West Indians) once denigrated for its "incompatibility" with the Hispanic nation.[4] Although the play possesses female characters who are central to unraveling the narrative, the drama is primarily concerned with telling the forgotten story of Panamanian West Indians whose narratives have been erased from Panamanian national archives. The play's central protagonist is a young West Indian girl, Manuelita, who fights to tell the story of her immigrant ancestors for a school assignment. Manuelita learns much of this story from her mother Verónica and her paternal great- grandparents, Abuela Leah and Abuelo Samuel, who subsequently relate their own personal narrative of emigrating from Barbados to Panama to work on the Panama Canal. The narrative is retold to Manuelita's classmates from her perspective relating the importance of memory and remembering. However, the sole purpose of the narrative is to relate the collective discrimination and mistreatment of Panamanian West Indians and how they have been demeaned, denigrated, and disenfranchised by the Panamanian nation-state. In *De/From Barbados*, these immigrants are primarily males, the protagonists George, James, and Samuel, who serve to reconstruct a masculine narrative of Panamanian West Indian history. This is understood given that Lowe de Goodin and members of her literary generation such as Gerardo Maloney, Carlos "Cubena" Wilson, and Carlos Russell, all born between 1940 and 1945, are primarily concerned with resurrecting and inserting

[4] In Panama, West Indians who emigrated primarily from the English-speaking Caribbean in the late 19th and early 20th century to work on the Railroad (1850-55) and Canal (1904-1914) were considered to be "incompatible" with the Panamanian nation-state because of linguistic, cultural, and racial differences. West Indians were visibly black and professed a racialized consciousness that defied Panamanian and by extension Latin American racial identity politics where nationalism supersedes racial identity.

West Indian history into Panamanian national archives through literature, culture, and memory[5].

## Melanie Taylor Herrera's Modern Urban Fiction

Unlike her literary predecessor Lowe de Goodin, Melanie Taylor Herrera's blackness does not permeate her literary works nor does her nationalistic affiliation with the Panamanian nation-state. Although she writes both poetry and prose, Taylor Herrera is recognized nationally and internationally as a short story writer in Panama, Central America, and Europe. In 2009, she was awarded the Central American Rafaela Contreras prize for women writing short fiction and has received several recognitions for her poetry and flash fiction. Her works include: *Tiempos acuáticos* [Aquatic Times](2000), *Amables predicciones* [Friendly Predictions] (2005), *Microcosmos* [Microcosm] (2008), *Camino a Mariato* [Walk to Mariato] (2009), and Atrapasueños [Dreamcatcher] (2010), all published between 2000 and 2010. It is worth noting that Taylor Herrera's works are not totally divorced from a black aesthetic. In the essay, "Path of the Panamanian Drums", she discusses the importance of the drum in Panamanian culture and cites jazz as a metaphor for the shared African heritage of Afro-Colonials and West Indians in the Isthmus[6]. Likewise, "El viaje" [The Voyage] from the short story collection *Camino a Mariato,* transports the reader to the Colonial period and deals with the topics of slavery, rebellion, and female solidarity. "El viaje" takes place in Colonial Panama during the late 17th century and describes the lives of six black female servants whose existence is plagued by slavery and servitude and the ensuing arrival of pirates spearheaded by Henry Morgan, the buccaneer who invaded Colonial Panama in 1671. However, this is one of the few narratives that treats the issue of race or slavery. The common thread that unites her literary repertoire includes female protagonists who

[5] Contemporary Panamanian writers of West Indian ancestry are bilingual speakers of Spanish and English and navigate culturally and linguistically between Panama, Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. Born between 1934 and 1945, Anglophone Caribbean authors such as Melva Lowe de Goodin (1945), Gerardo Maloney (1945), Carlos "Cubena" Wilson (1941) and Carlos Russell (1934 ), represent the first generation of writers in Panama to discuss the "duality" of being both Panamanian and Caribbean. They react to this duality in a myriad of ways from appropriating an integrationist perspective that defines them exclusively as Spanish-speaking Panamanians or by simultaneously embracing their black Anglophone Caribbean roots along with their "panameñidad" or Panamanian heritage. However, being Panamanian and Caribbean represents more than a dual heritage; their plural lineage connects these writers to Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States. Melva Lowe de Goodin, Gerardo Maloney, Carlos Russell, and Carlos Wilson represent members of this generation and their works illustrate the complexities of being both Caribbean and Panamanian in the twenty-first century.

[6] In Panama there are two groups of black descendants, Afro-Colonials whose ancestors arrived as a result of slavery and West Indians, an immigrant group primarily from Barbados and Jamaica that came to work on the Railroad (1850-55) and Canal (1904-1914). Many Afro-Colonials align themselves with the Panamanian nation-state and have been reluctant to profess a black racialized identity while West Indians profess a racialized black identity similar to African Americans in the United States.

struggle with contemporary themes that plague the 21st century: identity, suicide, silence, and solitude. Although Melanie Taylor Herrera's fiction does not coincide with the race conscious works of her literary predecessors, it dovetails with their feminist consciousness as women writers. As DeCosta-Willis further acknowledges,

In spite of such disclaimers, there is a decided feminist consciousness in the works of many contemporary Afra-Hispanic writers, who create strong and independent female characters; rewrite national history through their portraits of revolutionary women; describe grandmothers, othermothers, and literary foremothers who have shaped their work; support a female culture of artists and workers; examine women's inner worlds (their psychology and spirituality); underscore in their lives and works the importance of female deities such as Yemayá, Ochún, and the female body; question femininity and women's traditional roles in patriarchal societies; examine the effect that silence, isolation, and invisibility have on female agency and creativity; and expose both private and public acts of violence and discrimination against women" (xxv).

Taylor Herrera conveys these contemporary women issues in her new millennium fiction.

Taylor Herrera's first published short story collection *Tiempos acuáticos* (2000) deals with a range of new millennium topics including infidelity, silence, suicide and urbanity, to name a few. The short story that shares the title of the collection is author Taylor Herrera's favorite and grapples with issues of loneliness, silence, and suicide. In "Tiempos acuáticos", the central female protagonist Tokio confronts life-long issues relating to silence, solitude, and suicide that stem from her own mother's apparent suicide when she was merely two years old. Spiraling into a deep depression and despair, Tokio confesses early on through interior monologue that not even death desires her. This prepares the reader for the subsequent interior monologue that chronicles Tokio's quest to terminate her existence. Tokio attempts to commit suicide by igniting the gas oven and placing her head inside, only to be discouraged by the fact that her head is too big for the task. Tokio's grandmother enters the kitchen during the precise moment when she attempts to end her life. Her grandmother handles this event the same way she grappled with her daughter's (Tokio's mother) own apparent suicide: by avoidance and denial. The grandmother feigns ignorance and rewrites the narrative by incorrectly surmising that the smell of gas stemmed from Tokio's unsuccessful attempt to bake a cake.

Upset that she cannot even complete the apparent simple task of suicide, Tokio continues her quest by cutting her left wrist with a razor blade. Once again, her suicide efforts are thwarted when a stranger, Lucas Passat, comes to the door looking for her older brother who has just left the country to pursue studies in Mexico. Like her grandmother, the stranger reacts with apparent indifference but saves Tokio by bandaging her wrists. Tokio is immediately attracted to the dark character and agrees to meet Lucas at his apartment and loses her virginity. After engaging in uneventful sex, she requests that Lucas take her to the beach. To his surprise, she does not want him to

stay and urges him to leave signifying that she no longer needs him. In a clear role reversal, Tokio manipulates Lucas for her own needs to free herself from depression, loneliness, and solitude. Clearly, she has manipulated him for her own self-gratification.

The narrative culminates with the female protagonist's mental liberation through the metaphor of water which references the title and symbolizes her liberation from her own depression. As she informs the reader, "[c]on cada brazada mi deseo de vivir aumenta" [with every stroke my desire to live increases] (Taylor, *Tiempos acuáticos* 43). Every stroke signifies Tokio's struggle to become liberated from a cycle of depression and silence that has prevented her from realizing her true complete self. Water is both liberating and liberator and signifies the birth of her new existence and active participation in life.

Published five years after her first body of work, *Amables predicciones* (2005) evidences that Taylor Herrera has evolved as a *cuentista* in the way that she manipulates language which results in a manifold of interpretations and readings. In the prologue, the author notes that the "personajes y situaciones que bien mirados no resultan tan dulces e inocentes como aparentan en un principio. Al igual que el cuento que da título al libro *Amables predicciones*, los desenlaces tienden a desmentir las primeras expectativas del lector" [the characters and situations that appear pleasant are not as sweet and innocent as they seem in the beginning. Similar to the short story that shares the title of the collection, *Friendly Predictions*, the outcomes tend to disprove the reader's initial expectations] (Taylor Herrera *Amables predicciones* 9). *Amables predicciones* is divided into three sections: "Cuentos con la letra A" [Short Stories with the Letter A], "Tiempos acuáticos "[Aquatic Times] and "Cuentos y poemas misceláneos"[Miscellaneous Poems and Short Stories]. "Agenesia" [Agenesis], a short story beginning with the letter A, manipulates and deceives the reader from the onset of the narrative through the simultaneous omission and inclusion of details surrounding the central protagonist Marta. It incorporates Marta's life–long struggles as she sits on a plane preparing for take-off. Marta is characterized as a woman "de ojos verdes, ojos de mujer, de gata, de muñeca" (green womanly cat-like, doll-like eyes) (Taylor Herrera, *Amables predicciones* 19). At first glance, it appears that the protagonist is principally preoccupied with flying. However, Taylor Herrera appropriates the metaphor of the "viaje" or "trip"to present Marta's complicated life. Taylor Herrera weaves Marta's troubled past into the female protagonist's current life with her boyfriend Ernesto. Taylor Herrera intermingles the protagonist's thoughts of the present with those of the past utilizing a focalized omniscient narrator who reveals that Marta suffered from an abusive and overly critical father and an incomprehensible mother.

> Se sentó en el baño. Algo caliente salió de entre sus piernas y sintió alivio. Cuando tenía quince años su padre había abierto la puerta del baño sin tocar y la encontró así sentía con la falda puesta. Sus ojos verdes se encontraron con la mirada furiosa del hombre. La había

> agarrado por un hombro y la había estrellado contra la pared. Nunca había sentido tanto miedo en su vida. Tú, tú…decía su padre que casi no podía hablar. (Taylor Herrera, *Amables predicciones* 19)
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> [She sat down in the bathroom. Something hot streamed from between her legs and she felt relieved. When she was fifteen, her father had opened the bathroom door without knocking and found her sitting like that with her skirt on. Her green eyes met the man's furious gaze. He had grabbed her by the shoulder and had thrown her against the wall. She had never felt so much fear in her life. You…you…said her father who almost could not speak.]

Abuse and lack of understanding from her parents led Marta to attempt suicide and flee home at the age of fifteen. To deal with her troubled childhood, she undergoes treatment from a psychiatrist. Taylor Herrera leaves footprints of Marta's troubled throughout the narrative that the reader must weave together: a suicide attempt, the inability to conceive, an abusive childhood, and familial abandonment. Marta has lived a life of passivity but finally opens up by fleeing a troubled childhood. Throughout the narrative, it appears that Marta has suffered from an abusive childhood as a young woman at the hands of her father. However, at the conclusion of the narrative it becomes clear that her father's rage stems from something else: Marta's gender identity.

Marta's gender identity is revealed to the reader through Marta's boyfriend, Eduardo, who discovers her childhood photographs while she is traveling.

> Un día cualquiera llegaría Eduardo a regar sus plantas. Llegaría reído y luciendo elegante como siempre. Seguramente le dejaría una tarjeta cariñosamente escondida debajo de una alomohada en el sofá. Vería la cajeta en la mesa de la cocina y sentiría curiosidad. Abriría cada album despacio y vería las fotos de su infancia. Habría un hombre enorme con cara seria, una mujer de rostro triste y un niño con sus mismos ojos. Al pasar las fotos vería con el niño se hacia mayor hasta convertirse en un hombre. Y luego solo vería fotos de ella y ataría cabos. Porque esos ojos verdes, ojos de mujer, de gata, de muñeca solo podían ser los ojos de Marta. (21)
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> [On any day Eduardo would arrive to water the plants. He would arrive laughing and looking good as usual. Safely he would leave a card affectionately hidden under a pillow on the sofa. He would see the box on the kitchen table and become curious. He would open each photo album slowly and see her childhood photos. There would be a large man with a serious face, a woman with a sad face, and a boy with the

> same eyes. Looking at the photos he would see the boy getting older and transforming into a man. And then he would only see the pictures of her and tie up loose ends. Because those green eyes, female eyes, cat-like eyes, doll like eyes could only be Marta's eyes.]

The young boy who populates these photos is clearly Marta. The final paragraph of the short story reveals to the reader and to Eduardo Marta's gender identity as a woman. Thus, the last paragraph of the narrative requires the reader to reevaluate the entire story and reinterpret Marta's identity as transsexual or transgender. As a young boy, Marta dressed and behaved as a girl which infuriated her father as evidenced in the above passage. Marta's struggle with her gender identity as a young child clearly created problems that led her to attempt suicide and flee home at age 15. Now with Eduardo, Marta is living the life of a woman and never revealed to him her difficult childhood or her previous identity as a boy. The final paragraph also provides meaning to the title of the piece, "Agenesis" or the absence or incomplete development of an organ or body part. Although the narrative does not delve into the specifics of Marta's genitalia, the title can be read as a metaphor of the protagonist's lack of development and/or identification with her prescribed gender identity: male. Furthermore, Taylor Herrera's choice to hide this from the reader until the conclusion of the narrative not only permits multiple readings but also mirrors how these individuals must hide their gender identity and their desire for transformation from their families, love ones, and ultimately the world.

Issues of transgender identity, transsexual identity, and homosexuality are even more complex in Latin America due to a culture of *machismo* or patriarchy. The behavior of Marta's father sheds light on the culture of *machismo* in Latin America. Similar to Hispanic Caribbean writer Mayra Santos Febres (1966) who treats taboo issues of the transvestite through her controversial character Sirena Selena of the same titled novel (*Sirena Selena, vestida de pena*, 2000) Taylor Herrera brings to the forefront these issues in Latin America through fictionalized characters who echo those in the real world who are silenced, marginalized, and invisibilized.

Like "Agenesia", "Pescador" deals with the social taboos of homosexuality, bisexuality and masculinity. The central protagonist Ernesto is attracted to both women and men. He is indeed two Ernestos and must hide part of his sexuality from the world because it is not accepted. As a young man, this haunted him and his sexual ambivalence towards women caused problems with other male companions. Ernesto's two identities can be interpreted in a variety of ways. On the one hand, his public identity is the one where he openly celebrates women. On the other, his behavior could be interpreted as that of a closeted homosexual who must hide his sexuality because of the lack of acceptance of homosexuality in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, it is unclear whether Ernesto is a closeted homosexual or bisexual. At the conclusion of the narrative, he appears to have an unrealized desire for a beautiful woman named

Eloísa. Although it is unclear whether Eloísa is real or a figment of his imagination, it seems that he desires the opposite sex. Furthermore, Ernesto's attraction to both men and women can also be interpreted as a public/private duality that some homosexual men choose to carry out because of societal attitudes towards homosexuality. In public, he seeks women while in private he realizes his secret desires for men. In United States African American culture, this duality is known as the "down low" where black homosexual men live openly as heterosexual but privately as homosexuals. Although this term carries a myriad of meanings and connotations as Riley Snorton suggests, "[down low] is a term that typically refers to black men who have sex with men and women and do not identify as gay, bisexual or queer". In African American culture, this phenomenon results from the African American community's failure to accept homosexuality primarily for religious reasons and an ultraconservative value system. In this respect, the conservative African American culture mirrors that of Latin America and the Caribbean.

*Camino a Mariato*[7] (2009) possesses disparate themes ranging from slavery, historical fiction, myth, and more broadly identity. The short story "Rémora" [Remora] presents the case of a 30 year old single female protagonist named Marcia, la flaca or Marcia, the skinny one, who posseses a mundane existence and lives vicariously through her sex crazed friend Verónica. Remoras, also known as suckerfish, are "noted for attaching themselves to, and riding about on, sharks, other large marine animals, and oceangoing ships. Remoras adhere by means of a flat, oval sucking disk on top of the head" (Britannica). Similar to a remora, Marcia attaches herself to her gregarious friend Verónica to define herself and give meaning to her life. Marcia's loathing self-portrait says it all: "Después de todo yo sólo soy Marcia, la flaca, con unos ojos de ratoncito y no se puede esperar mucho de alguien como yo pero sí de alguien como Vero" [After everything, I'm only Marcia, the skinny one, with rat like eyes, and one cannot expect a lot from someone like me but from someone like Vero] (*Camino a Mariato* 12). Clearly, Marcia suffers from low self-esteem and feels unworthy in contrast to her beautiful voluptuous friend Verónica. Marcia is a single career-oriented woman who yearns to be in a committed relationship. By contrast, her friend Verónica runs through men. Marcia recounts Verónica's numerous relationships including one with an old man, a *jubilado*. This one is special because they are about to marry. Clearly, Verónica is with him to collect a paycheck and ultimately leaves him at the altar unable or unwilling to consummate the relationship. Upon their departure from the unrealized wedding, Marcia and Verónica grab a taxi and the driver offers to take them to a hotel. It is unclear whether the driver wants to have sex with Verónica or Marcia or perhaps with both of them to realize a threesome. In the end, Marcia decides to abandon her friend; perhaps freeing herself from Verónica's hold. Ultimately, Marcia has the opportunity to

[7] Mariato or Mariato Point is situated in the southern part of the Veraguas Province in central Panama.

pursue wild unplanned sex but leaves her friend behind illustrating that the life that Verónica has, although it may appear to be ideal, does not represent Marcia's core existence or values. At thirty years old, Marcia experiences the universal problematic that affects many single educated women who yearn for more but find themselves in a society that values women for aesthetics instead of intellect. Marcia no longer utilizes Verónica to define her existence. By fleeing the taxi, she demonstrates her independence and her total separation from Verónica. She is no longer a remora who must depend on others for survival, happiness, or a meaningful existence.

"Piel" [Skin] is a narrative that deals with the identity of a female protagonist who leads two lives: one as a homely schoolteacher and the other as a sultry, seductive scam artist. The title is a metaphor for the changing identity of the female protagonist known by the initials, M.S., who leads a double life as a preschool teacher and scam artist. Currently a fugitive scam artist, the female protagonist is determined to tell her story. She relates her life as a teacher, who wore glasses and arrived to work habitually at 7:00 in the morning. However, it is clear from her methodical self-portrait that she has taken extreme measures to hide her true identity or "skin" from others. She acknowledges that she revealed little of herself to her colleagues, that is, whether she was happy or sad, married or single or simply if she liked cats or dogs. She describes her fictional life by utilizing the metaphor of tattoos. Fake tattoos demarcate her fictionalized identity marked by glasses and a schoolteacher hairstyle, which become symbols of a fictionalized self she fashions to construct an alternate identity. She reveals the fictitious tattoos in the following passage:

> En las noches repaso mus tatuajes, ficticiosos y reales, para poder dormir. Es mi manera de bajar del carrusel y abatir al monstruo de mis insomnios. Una rosa en uno de mis tobillos, una palabra en uno de mis glúteos. Esos son los tatuajes reales. Los ficticios son los anteojos de pasta, mi cara serena, mis trajes de señora bien, el peinado recogido. Estos fueron aún más dolorosos pues debía hacérmelos a diario con el temor de que se borrasen. Eran los tatuajes que el mundo, ellos, veían. Para mí el dolor era tan intense que, a veces, ya no sentía nada (Taylor Herrera *Camino a Mariato* 16).
>
> [At night I look at my tattoos, the fictitious and real ones, in order to sleep. It is my way of getting off the carousel and hunt the monster of my insomnia. A rose on one of my ankles, a word on one of my buttocks. Those are the real tattoos. The fake ones are the plastic glasses, my serene face, my professional suits, [and] pulled back hairstyle. These were even more painful because I had to put them on daily with the fear that they would be erased. They were the tattoos that the world,

> they, would see. For me the pain was so intense that sometimes I did not feel anything anymore.]

The fake tattoos are juxtaposed with the real ones symbolized by a rose on her ankle and a word on her buttocks. The tattoos are also symbols of a reconstructed life: glasses, serene face, ladylike suits, and pulled back hairstyle. Unlike her real ones, these tattoos are only visible to the world. Thus, transforming into M.S. is a calculated methodical process. In turn, skin becomes a metaphor for revealing one's true identity. The reader leaves wondering if s/he truly knows who the protagonist is. The female protagonist concludes her revelation with the following words, "Yo solo he dejado retazos de piel aquí y allá con los que he confeccionado un edredón de vida para cubrir este cuerpo lívido mientras me narro historias antes de dormir" (I have only left patches of skin here and there with which I have made a quilt of life to cover this pale body while I tell myself stories before bedtime) (Taylor Herrera, *Camino a Mariato* 18). Both the reader and the protagonist have doubts about the protagonist's identity; it becomes more and more difficult to decipher between fiction and reality and to navigate the tattoos that mark her real or perhaps reconstructed identity. Moreover, it is clear that the scam artist is playing with the art of narration and is utilizing memory, words, and narration to scam the reader in the same way that she scams those around her. The reader is also a victim of the scam artist and must ultimately determine what is reality and fiction.

At first glance, it appears that "Remora" and "Piel" possess disparate themes. However, they unite thematically in that they center on female protagonists who are unhappy with their existence and uncomfortable with their skin. Similar to the other narratives analyzed here from Taylor Herrera's short story collections, the protagonists struggle with universal issues that women throughout the diaspora confront in an urban, modern, technological yet isolating society. Taylor Herrera's characters are emblematic of female and to some extent male experiences of modernity and allow us to fashion new definitions of diasporic women and new readings of contemporary Afra-Latin American fiction. Moreover, her literary works aid in expanding notions of female Caribbean identity in the new millennium and beyond that permit readings analogous with other female writers of the diaspora.

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