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Straight Outta Livingston: Black Indigeneity, Wordsmithing and Code-Switching in Wingston González's Poetry

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Abstract

This essay examines Guatemalan Garifuna poet Wingston González's conceptualizations of black indigeneity, which are manifested in the poetic voice's contemplations of language-identity, spirituality-kinship and memory-homeland. Given that these concepts resist temporal and thematic compartmentalization, I locate them in the narrative of origins, departures and arrivals that have framed Garifuna experience since 1797 when the ancestors were forced to leave St. Vincent and settle off the coast of Central America. I hold that these discursive strategies have weathered storms and are the epistemic substance of Garifuna gnosis. In González's oeuvre they become the means and mechanism by which the poet skillfully navigates the turbulent seas of a literary sphere that was fashioned with the express purpose of effacing all traces of indigenous epistemologies from its surface.

Keywords

Central America; Guatemala; Diaspora; Black Indigeneity; Garifuna; Garinagu; Labuga; Yorumein

Wingston González's career as a poet began long before he published his first collection of poetry, *The Magicians of the Dusk [and Blues Again]*¹, with the Guatemalan Editorial Cultura in 2005. In the years since that first publication, González has made a name for himself as an award-winning writer, a disciplined and methodical literary craftsman, and a versatile critic like few writers of his generation. He soars over the literary landscape with nine books and many more poems included in literary anthologies published in English, Portuguese, French and German.² He is without question the most important and prolific Garifuna writer in Mesoamerica today. Despite the reach and magnitude of his work, literary critics have left his oeuvre virtually untouched, perhaps owing to the fact that the themes that arise in his work are categorically distinct from those of disenchantment and violence that have concerned critics of post-war Central American literature. Thematically and epistemologically, González's poetry stands alone as a contemporary expression of Guatemalan black indigeneity, and this essay aims to ignite a discussion of the Garifuna gnosis at the core of his oeuvre. As I demonstrate, González delivers this knowledge in three concepts that infuse his poetry with

meaning: 1) language and identity, 2) spirituality and kinship, and 3) and memories of coastal homelands. Rather than isolating these interrelated concepts, I find them to be part of a larger narrative of sojourning—origins, departures and arrivals—in Garifuna epistemologies. I argue that these mechanisms are deployed strategically by González as he marks himself as black and indigenous, a member of the Garifuna *pueblo originario*³ whose deft skill at negotiating locales in perpetual flux has been developed over centuries of experience and endurance on the coasts of the Caribbean and Central America.

Garifuna Origins

The story of the Garifuna community in Central America is complex, and it involves a history fraught with hardship, migration, and contact with other peoples as they moved through various points in the Caribbean and Central America before settling in today's standing communities. The contemporary Garifuna people are believed to have descended from the intermarriage of African slaves with indigenous Amerindian Caribs in the Caribbean, and the contemporary Garifuna language reflects this history as well as the extensive contact with European colonizers in the region. As Escure (2004) notes, the language “has been claimed to have a primary Arawak substrate, combined with other linguistic elements, including Carib, Spanish, French and English” (36).⁴ Over the centuries, Arawakan languages were brought to Central America and the Caribbean through migration; yet, Garifuna is the only Arawakan language spoken in the region today. Sometime prior to the 1600s, the Arawak peoples on St. Vincent Island came into contact with an indigenous Carib community. The resulting linguistic blend of Cariban and Arawakan languages was what was found on St. Vincent in the 1600s when the shipwrecked African slaves arrived, and remnants of both Cariban and Arawakan languages are well represented in the Garifuna language today. According to Escure (2004), the grammar of Garifuna appears “to include synthetic Arawakan morphosyntax, as well as lexical and morphological Carib elements” (46).

Garifuna history prior to 1797 is not clear. However, it is accepted by many historians and the Garifuna themselves that the genesis of the community occurred sometime in the 1600s, when two Spanish ships carrying African slaves to the Caribbean were shipwrecked near the island of St. Vincent.⁵ The surviving unchained Africans who made it ashore then mixed with the indigenous Carib-Arawak population on the island, and over several generations, they came to be known as “Black Caribs.”⁶ In 1797, the Black Caribs were forcibly removed from St. Vincent by the British and most were deported to Roatán Island off the coast of Honduras.⁷ Farming conditions in the new location

were much less amenable than on St. Vincent, and members of the group very soon moved to mainland Honduras and shortly thereafter began migrating northward to what is today Guatemala and Belize and southward to present-day Nicaragua. By the mid-late nineteenth century, groups of Black Caribs had established several communities along the Central American Atlantic Coast, including Livingston, which provides the epistemological site of departure for Wingston González's poetry.

Regardless of where they were established, the communities founded by Garifuna people were situated between the two traditional sources of sustenance: the sea and its fish to the front of the homes were the men's responsibility and lowland areas to the rear of the homes were for women's manioc cultivation (González 1969: 24). Labuga, founded between 1804 and 1806, was renamed Livingston by decree in 1831.⁸ Although the Garifuna community was displaced because of the 1832 war between Guatemala and Honduras, Livingston was reestablished and expanded to become what is today the heart of the Garifuna community in Guatemala.⁹ A seafaring people, the metaphors of leadership outside of kinship relations reflected this history as elders were appointed captains of communities, and these captains then appointed two quartermasters to assist them. One of the principal duties of Captains was to oversee Garifuna interests in external affairs, particularly the logging industry, and accounts from the period highlight their pride and autonomy: "The Black Caribs became an exclusive people who give one the idea of tolerating the white population . . . rather than being tolerated by them. This indifference to their white neighbours is curiously exhibited in the sale of fish" (Gullick 41), which they would only sell to Garifuna households. Such pride, these accounts illustrate, led to the acquisition of Spanish, English, Creole and Miskito without diminishing the linguistic vitality of the Garifuna language.

The internal configuration of the Livingston Garifuna community began to change; however, from the 1870s forward as wage labor in Puerto Barrios' emerging banana industry drew men away from Livingston. The 23.1 km (14.4 miles) ride in a *lancha* (motorboat) from one town to another became significant, as it then led to a change in the traditional structure of kinship in Livingston's Garifuna community to one where Garifuna men were virtually absent from their homes, especially between the ages of 18-54 (González 1984: 3). While some men left permanently, others continued on a recurrent pattern of migration during their productive years, finally returning in old age—or after death in the form of spirits—to their home village. The experience of partaking in a community with an age-old proclivity for managing two cultures at once, integrating the spirit world into the world of the living, expressing respect for maternal figures in the home while respecting the sojourning paternal figures, among other balanced concepts, appears in González's poem, "as a child, the things they

proclaimedclaimclaim [adam recites childhoods]”¹⁰ (2006). The poem, dedicated to his mother, was unpublished at the time it was uploaded to González’s earliest personal webpage and is one of ten poems that provide a glimpse into the origins of the poet behind the voice.

González, who was raised by his mother and grandmother, captures the female voices of his youth and the memories he conveys in snippets that interrupt the voices of the two women. Written in a stream of consciousness fashion, the poem moves from Spanish to English and Garifuna as the poetic voice captures the polyphonic voices of his household and community. While these elements of style can be found in other poems, the repetition of a single word, “comegente/devourer” is the most notable feature of the composition. “Devourer” appears in the light gray background of the page itself 198 times, and 13 times in the poem, with six instances in bold font. At once disconcerting and overwhelming, the power of the devourer is made manifest as the poetic voice invokes mother’s and grandmother’s proclamations that the devourer has killed men and wishes to kill the men in their family, that the devourer has hurt children and that, ultimately, the devourer is a female spirit who owns destinies. In Garifuna spirituality, the devourer is often seen as a spirit more powerful than the devil himself, for it has the power to take on the appearance of animals and focuses its destructive influences on the homes of its victims (Taylor 105). The poem’s verses “Oh Devourer!” and “Oh Lady of the World!” invoke the powerful force of the devourer in the midst of a context where the daily rituals to ward off evil spirits coexist with the boyish rituals of ThunderCat cartoons, HBO programs and 50 Cent rap music.

The poetic voice conjures up the spirit world in order to highlight the fine distinction between the voices of the spirits and those of the living, reality and television, as well as the presence of those who remain in Livingston and those who are away, either in Belize or the United States. Not only does the national anthem of the latter make an appearance in the poem, so too is the dream of migrating North made explicit. In the poem, the intrasentential¹¹ and intersentential¹² forms of code-switching between Spanish-English-Garifuna are used to invoke that which has become part of the present despite the miles between Livingston and Garifuna sites abroad. In this vein, repetition makes its appearance once again as “Belice” appears abruptly as singular utterances 6 times in the poem as instances of disruption in the more fluid syntactic pattern of the poem. The poetic voice thus captures in this poem the multiplicities and flux of Garifuna experience at all levels and dimensions, covering the expansiveness of homelands and centuries of spirits in motion.

Before the prizes and books that came years later in González’s career, these ten early poems announced a new type of poetic voice in Guatemalan letters. In “I, II y III,” the poetic voice erupts

with confidence declaring: “*They have one language and I have many, boom! boom!/ My flow is felt where wherever I go, uh huh/I, who was born in a Caribbean illuminated by lamplight/I can move anyone/the sirens tell me that stems are sown in the broken bones of the elders*”¹³ The verses were and continue to be a challenge to monolingual literary production that, until recently, privileged writers who wrote solely in Spanish. The enunciations of the young poetic voice mark the unexpected appearance of a new voice on the literary scene. One which, despite having been raised in a dimly lit Caribbean context far from the literary epicenter of Guatemala, now partakes in the cosmopolitanism of a subject in contact with worlds and influences beyond the boundaries of his nation-state. His linguistic slights of hand include putting the English language at his service through his phonetic modification of “boom,” fashioning it to fit within the phonetic rules of Spanish. Further, his play with the word “flow” brings forth again the intrasentential code-switching that highlights his agility with the two languages. The word “flow,” moreover, is a loaded word that evokes images of the spoken word and rap music associated with the black diaspora, which itself is coded as an urban populace. The juxtapositions in these verses are plentiful, bringing to bear the affront to a hitherto sheltered and provincial Guatemalan literary scene.

The poetic voice’s wordsmithing thrives because in its abstractness, it remains grounded in the concreteness of Garifuna experience. Never far from the poet’s purview is the conviviality of the spirit world and that of the living since even in this electrically charged poem, the verses precede the eloquently stated “the sirens tell me that stems are sown in the broken bones of the elders.”¹⁴ The words alone are powerful, but they are made even more so as the poetic voice balances short and long enunciations throughout the poem, bringing to life that moving “flow” he boasts being able to bring any reader. In another poem from that same 2006 collection, “Writes to the Church of Philadelphia: Poem Before the Statue of Columbus in Livingston”¹⁵ the poetic voice delves into similar techniques to provide the reader with images that capture his cosmopolitan reach: “Think. I’m a rastaman, beautiful people; I’m an *Enough*man, I’m a nothingman. The imminent tribulation of the android in which my eyes dry/ and i jump crazily from an empire that is not of this world, *thereisnothingwrongwrong ingivingyouwarmth*, angelic and empty.”¹⁶ Moving from English to Spanish, he used the imperative mood to bring the reader to literally imagine the subject bearing the poetic voice, and as he moves from being three dimensions at once. His transfigurations—once again demonstrative of the fragility between the world of the spirits and the living, of specter and veracity—conjure up the exotic Rastafarian sought out by tourists who seek to find quintessential blackness in Caribbean sites, the ethicist who contemplates the limits of the subject, and the robot from science fiction who bears the

figure but not the affect of a human being. In doing so, the poetic voice highlights the “problem of indeterminacy,” a philosophical question concerning the circuitousness of definitions and the need for approximations, a Kantian solution to the problem. Wordsmithing, particularly when it involves code-switching, provides a solution to the poetic voice’s desire to convey an approximation of the self on a journey that crosses spiritual, linguistic, literary and geographic divides.

Garifuna Departures

González left Livingston at the age of fifteen when he accepted a scholarship to continue his schooling in San Marcos, Guatemala. A member of what he calls a “trans nation,” his leave-taking marked his initiation into what he calls his “traveler’s vocation,” a path taken by those who feel themselves to be nomads, persistent voyagers (DJ Labuga 2015). Yet, González’s identity as a Garifuna poet born in Livingston follows him as he moves from one page to another, from one interview to the next literary feat. His work is doubly scrutinized, for the literary world demands perfection in the craft as well as the sensibility of a cultural broker who will use his “vivid language and expressive force” (Payeras 7), to provide an account of a historically marginalized Guatemalan Garifuna culture. In González’s oeuvre, the demands for “ethnic authenticity” are met with references to the literary and extra-literary influences that have shaped the poet/poetic voice in the course of his travels. In a poem aptly titled “Discrepancy”¹⁷ from his first published collection, *The Magicians of the Dusk* (2005: 32), the poetic voice states: “you¹⁸ are Vivaldi, Blues, boleros and Gospel/ I am rock, tropical, jazz and black.”¹⁹ If the reader wishes the poetic voice to conform, to settle, to remain chained to one way of rhythm, the poetic voice has effectively problematized that expectation. He is at once a different configuration of tempos converging, and yet as equally complex an arrangement as the interlocutor.

A central premise of this work, then, is that black indigeneity is beyond the outsider’s ken so long as the wish is to freeze that experience in a single status and state without allowing for movement, transformation and renewal. The demands for “ethnic authenticity” often led to early texts ebbing with acrimonious verses like those of “Hahari Wagübürigu [something like *the spirit of our fathers*]”²⁰ where the poetic voice’s transition from a lyrical tone to the mechanics of prose highlights the tension between such expectations:

a drunken scholar approaches me and asks
is your mother happy, Wingston?
and someone answers on my behalf
:you don’t have a mother son

you don't have a mother son of a bitch
because abrupt memories deny me
mark me
with the symbols of ignorance
the pathological passwords
of this linguistic juggling
not as Garifuna as they would like them to be

I thus publish my rancor/
As a testament **against all**
/against fire **above all**
/against words **above all**
/against reggaeton **above all**
/against catharsis itself
of those who brood in Spanish
over the vigil lights that the sea denied them²¹

The undercurrent of the poem is announced in its title, which makes present the spirits of the ancestors in the daily lives of the living who utter prayers in a European tongue for the souls that the sea took from them. In addition, while the historical conditions of loss of language and the surviving veneration for one's ancestors is not lost upon the poetic voice, the patronizing scholars who make assumptions about black indigenous culture miss the mark. The othering that occurs with the scholar's question about the poetic voice's mother is palpable, and the poet voice despises him and responds with his own insult in turn. Poignantly, he responds by giving way again to the lyrical style of his "pathological passwords" and his "linguistic juggling" that reveals itself to be "not as Garifuna as they all would want them to be." The poetic voice moves from formal and informal registers of Spanish, but not without 1) asserting his black indigenous Garifuna identity, and 2) engaging with the linguistic debates surrounding the centrality of language in contemporary Garifuna culture as well as current discussions of language loss as cultural death.

Today, Garifuna communities make up 0.0004% of the Guatemalan population, with roughly 5,040 individuals identifying themselves as such (Guatemala Census, 2002).²² The Garifuna community in Livingston is more visible than that of Puerto Barrios, but one hears very little Garifuna on the street in this extremely diverse town of Q'eqchi' Maya, Creole East Indian, Chinese and Ladino

inhabitants.²³ That neither the *voice* of Livingston nor its *face* is Garifuna is a fact that is only confirmed if one has actually set foot in the area.²⁴ It is quite like Punta Gorda, Belize, located just 30.8 km (19.2 miles) away by ferry, in that both towns have always been an ethno-linguistically diverse locales largely independent from the cultural centers of their respective nations. An important difference, and one which has marked the Garifuna community in Livingston, is that their position as marginalized indigenous labor force has remained unchanged throughout the course of their *longue durée* on the Guatemalan coast. Blackness and black indigeneity have had a place in Belizean national discourse, but these concepts have been largely omitted in the racial discourses of Guatemala. Overt racism toward Garifuna communities is expressed freely both inside and outside of Livingston, even as the town continues to be heralded by officials of the emerging tourist industry as a locus of Garifuna soul.

The poetic voice does not attempt to mystify the Garifuna experience or attempt to idealize a culture in the tropics. In “(o leleru Bungiu)” from his *My/Miss Voodoo Dolls* (2013)²⁵, the poetic voice announces in the second verse that he will tell the story of the Garinagu people before launching into fragments of images associated with his Guatemalan seascape: “Yurumein,” the homeland that invokes fear and an open wound in the poetic voice, and the abrupt enunciation of “Wanaragua,” the masked warrior dance, that erupts in the poem like a swift memory. These enunciations appear sporadic before becoming anchored, a technique that is manifested as the verses begin to conform to prescriptive syntactic rules in tandem with the inclusion of more details anchored in the Garifuna past:

the tragedy of the ivorycaste of the black slaves of the sea. To see the horizon is to see
the series. to look over there to accept themselves chained. Machetes and blood. Aside.
white bestial mouths and the whip of history. Yoruméin. the young bureaucrats only
look at the ground. only toward fear. There, where there are no roots. where there isn't
anything. there where the witness is burying his nails in the clean fire of the sky blue
caribbean. There, where all the ghosts who deny me reside. But not the roots. the
roots, no.²⁶

The verses give the impression of a poetic voice standing on the shore, looking out at the horizon where the sky and ends of the sea meet. And standing there, looking yonder across the sea, invoking and seeing the West African ancestors that were forced cross the Atlantic in chains. Their relationship to their masters is profoundly captured in the metonymy that captures blood on one side and the white mouths of beasts to the other. The sound of the whip of history cracking over the backs of black men is audible in the visual of the young upwardly mobile Garifuna men who respond with

shame by lowering their gaze and looking fearfully at a ground that holds no roots. This is not the case for this poetic voice. As much as he has traveled across pages and places in form and fiction, the poetic voice retains a memory and connection to his homelands—St. Vincent and Livingston—and his roots. As accomplished as he might be, Yorumein is the site where his mythic roots remain, deeper even than the spirits that might deny him.

Yet, the tourists do not desire the tortured truth of a painful Garifuna past with deep roots in the transatlantic African slave trade and in the displacement of Caribbean first peoples. They want nothing to do with a people whose mothers once cultivated cassava, yucca, bananas and plantains and whose fathers dominated the Caribbean Sea in canoes, and who are now a community stretched across social networks forged by processes of migration (Kahn 169). Little do they care for the reciprocal exchanges made with members of kin along the coasts of Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, New York and Los Angeles as they define themselves and their communities. They want the exoticism they seek and wish to see performed in Livingston upon their arrival, as becomes clear as the poetic voice of “(o leleru Bungiu)” continues to tell the story of the Garinagu people:

tourists want palm trees. eleven ounces. they want black girls in bikinis and a voice
telling them your cash your cash telling them whatever at fifty time. dance hall or
reggaeton. baroque or reggaeton. poetry or the visceral story of the garinagu people.
god needs a people without a bellybutton. one that will walk over water toward the
misery one that will be the most touristic of a ransacked city. *a freestyle which this fanatical
song, that is the bellybutton, that is the idea . . .* they don't want to know that Haiti is
homeland in America. i complain. like a drug that disperses itself in the cartilages of
the child that sees excess from afar, atheist landscapes. they are not angels from
Ethiopia, they want, a young rasta man to sing a myth, a star and a cup of gifitti²⁷

no voodoo please

no chugu please

no palo mayombe

no garinagu please

no no no. power exploits me. the issue. glacial advice from men i refuse:

*mama garifuna buguya. no eres hijo de madre. mama garifuna buguya*²⁸.

The poem engages directly with outsider's racialized idealizations of Garifuna experience as the poetic voice recounts the Garifuna elements that link him to his homeland—that same spirituality in voodoo, the chugu and palo mayombe rituals that make the Garinagu experience, and that this indigenous

group holds in its soul. They are the rituals that connect living souls with spirits and kin across vast distances, even as the identity markers of language and identity are challenged by tourist dollars and the ahistorical conceptualization of black indigeneity held by tourist spectators. The socio-economic changes ushered by emerging tourist economies are, however, just one more turbulent wave in the history of a people who have already weathered the storms of colonialism and imperialism in centuries past. As Palacios reminds us in her study of Murillo, another Garifuna poet from Livingston, the highly adaptive quality of Garifuna peoples as they face changing cultural, economic and political tides is a notable cultural feature (2013: 3). In the coarsest statements of “(o leleru Bungiu),” the poetic voice expresses his vexation toward onlookers who see neither the dire circumstances or the fortitude of the people who inhabit the tourist escape they have ventured into. For this is a site that—like others in Guatemala—has already been ransacked by outsiders who threaten to leave them a populace missing the proverbial bellybutton in indigenous cosmologies across the Americas.

Yet, just a few verses further the poetic voice makes a transition, asserting itself and voicing something achingly concrete: that this very same freestyle, fanatical song shall be his bellybutton linking him to the homeland, his point of departure, his roots. As Anderson explains in his work on Garifuna identity in Honduras and beyond, contemporary conceptions of Garifuna identity work with an understanding of a transnational community of African descent and juridical indigenous status, which is based “on a configuration of indigeneity as marking a particular cultural status or condition, a mode of being more than a matter of blood” (8). For Garifuna peoples, meanings of blackness and indigeneity are not mutually exclusive. In González’s poetry, the affirmation of black indigeneity is as palpable as the rhythm that imbues his verses with depth and meaning. In these poems, Livingston is the context where blackness takes on the symbolic meanings associated with indigeneity—tradition, rootedness in territory and a special relationship to nature—with collective value and historic cultural value whilst engaging with the ways that conceptions of blackness render the subject a racial-cultural other at the margins (Anderson 9).

In “Myth of another self,”²⁹ from *Foam over Stones*³⁰ (2014), the poet/poetic voice likewise excavates and examines images of his childhood self. As he actively engages place and memory in his invocation of a childhood in Livingston, the poetic voice brings to life myths and mirages of the boy described in the poem as an “artificial child” who was just “some kid,” marking an ordinariness that is soon dramatically juxtaposed to the burning desire in the little boy. The flat lines used to state his seemingly unremarkable qualities turn to ashes as the boy rises like a phoenix to become another boy altogether, one who possesses a soul captured in the ornate verses describing the child as one who

“who loved today like one loves/ a fistful of diamonds”³¹. Similar lines describing a child growing older within a framework of similar contradictions accompany the exquisite verse. Poet and poetic voice erupt suddenly in the poem stating unequivocally, that he/they is/are that child, a fluke in a damned paradise. The image of Eden, a recurrent theme in González’s poetry, casts Livingston as a site of contradictions where beauty and disaster are core truths of a paradoxical context. The poem casts matter as struggle to fashion words to recapture it and hold on to the reins of a site rife with fury. Poet/poetic voice remain in control of the unbridled succession of images and emotions that surge from the context:

That child would be me. An image
of Livingston in ‘93
cartridges melt with
the venomous breath of the
sun; the two main streets of town stut
ter together a song
that no one has wanted
to even remember; a house of cards
just behind the synagogue
crumbles without awe or
a light to guard
the offensive precision
of the demolition. Sun of oxide
oxygen in flames, oh, two
suns filtered in the History
of Culture.³²

That is the Livingston as the poet and poetic voice recall it, the one through which a seven-year-old “gothic” child walked, contemplating structures and composing words to burn into memory the paths of a town that no other had wished to remember. A forgotten place, standing in the burning tropical heat, a place off the map for so many: that is González’s Livingston. Card games and prayers in a synagogue crumble as their structures go, without catching anyone else’s wonder or even a light to shed over the space where the structures once stood. A place where the filtered light of History and, specifically, the History of Culture, marks the passing of time across a landscape that was once a thriving port on the Atlantic and has now been exposed to the elements and weathered the storms of

the passing of time. Instead of the idyllic island retreat fit for retirees or the tropical party paradise for backpackers that is constructed for visitors, it is instead the cherished homeland of a lover/poetic voice that knows its soul. As Cabrera notes in her study of González oeuvre, we feel the rhythm, the grittiness, images in succession that flow like a rifle in repetition and fill space, inducing in us into a trance (n.p.). These are, then, the verses of a marooned poet/poetic voice on the shores of another context, living in one temporality while being marked by the other, his first homeland. Only *(t)his* Livingston could result in the electric compositions that cross the worlds of the living and the spirits, linguistic divides and the geographic reaches of a transnational Garifuna nation with a soulful prayer for the memory of homeland.

Garifuna Destinations

González received the 2015 Luis Cardoza y Aragón Mesoamerican Poetry Award for his book, *Traslaciones* (Translations, a meaning defined in Spanish in the astronomical sense without punning on language translation), which was published by the Guatemalan Editorial Cultura that same year. Asked if he would like to add something at the end of an interview shortly after receiving the award, González reflected on the moment in its literary context, particularly in light of the literary moment Latin America was experiencing, and on the small presses outside of the mainstream that are publishing trailblazing texts. He went further, adding:

This prize is for all them and for us to begin wiping out all that racist nonsense one must face when looking for work. Only then can you see that a Garifuna can have a career in any field, even writing, and even though it might seem absurd to have to stress that, it has to be done and these awards help to highlight those cases. I hope that it will also help instill pride in Garifuna peoples living outside of Livingston who have to face all kinds of prejudices.³³ (Ochoa 5)

Seen in this light, González's poetry is timely: it coincides with the increasing recognition of indigenous intellectual histories in Central America and, specifically, with Garifuna language and cultural rights movements across the isthmus.³⁴ It also coincides with language and cultural revitalization projects taking place not only in Central America, but also in the United States where the new Garifuna heartlands have become established in New York City on the East Coast and in Los Angeles on the West Coast. González's publications and awards have drawn a new kind of attention to Livingston, markedly distinct from depictions of it as a Caribbean touristscape, but as the coastal heartland of the Guatemalan Garifuna experience. He is the writer that leads to online comments from fellow

compatriots like Palacios Martínez's "Felicidades. Orgullo Garifuna de Livingston" (Congratulations, Garifuna pride from Livingston), Ellington's "Estoy muy orgulloso por la entrevista, por ser Garifuna" (I'm very proud of the interview because you are Garifuna), and Nuñez's "Estoy muy orgulloso de vos Hermano. Ojalá que toda la gente de Labuga Livingston se den cuenta. Felicidades" (I'm very proud of you, brother. I hope all the people in Labuga Livingston notice. Congratulations). These are just three of the many comments circulating the virtual world on news sites, online literary collectives, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. González's sojourning out of Livingston, as well as the routes taken by his own works in text and in the virtual world, have made him a household name and a symbol of pride in the transnational Garifuna nation.

Two questions seem to follow González in interviews about his work: the first query regards his knowledge of the Garifuna language and the second concerns his intentions to return to Livingston. For Guatemalan Garifuna communities, unlike those in Honduras, language shift and endangerment is indeed on the horizon because of the pervasive negative attitudes held by Guatemalan Spanish-speakers toward the Garifuna language and its speakers (Palacios and Ernst 2010). While most speakers state without hesitation that it is important within the Garifuna community, very few young men and women can speak it with proficiency. As González explains, being a good student and excelling professionally has demanded that he refine his Spanish to the expense of his usage of Garifuna, but this is precisely the right moment to recover the multilingualism that has always characterized the community (DJ Labuga 2015). In fact, González's oeuvre emerges as a negotiation of that very same liminal linguistic position between shift and recovery, between the demand for prescriptive usage and descriptive appreciation for linguistic variation, that the community as a whole faces.

As has long been demonstrated in studies of linguistic ideologies, where there is a strong disdain for a marginalized subject there is also derision directed at their speech. In González's oeuvre, the poetic voice's strategy of switching from one register of Spanish to another showcases his ability to negotiate linguistic codes and dismantles the linguistic expectations imposed by scholars seeking to otherize the voice and subjectivity of Garifuna experience. Language attitudes toward members of the Guatemalan Garifuna community lead to expectations that the speech issued from the lips of speakers not be standard Spanish. Challenging that assumption head-on, González faces the long-standing tradition of writing literature—and government sponsorship of such—in monolingual Standard Spanish. In line with other indigenous writers of Guatemala, he eschews monolingual stylistic conventions for a falsely presumed standard Spanish monolingual readership. This use of non-

standard Spanish, a socio-economic marker, is the technique employed in many of his later poems, including his “(u omenage contra Livingston)”: “*life is so easy*, says a voice-over, *as easy as slurping it up/ yes*, I say in voice-over, *as easy as slurping it up/ slurping you, island of mine/ of course, yes, my voice over, how fun life seems when it is as easy/ as slurping it up, slurping, slurping endlessly.*”³⁵ The content is aligned thematically with the poetic voice’s impressions of Livingston as an island, and in particular, as the poetic voice’s private island, a cherished place on the horizon to which he will return. Content aside, it is orthographic conventions that raise eyebrows as González the poet makes the deliberate decision to compose a poem rife with spelling transgressions. It is a challenge, to the literary tradition and, in particular, to the prescriptivists who measure the value of writing by its adherence to spelling and grammar over image and expression. As a well-published, award winning poet, González has finally arrived at a place in his career in which he can make such affronts and bring the reader to question the processes of production, circulation and consumption of literature.

Issued on the heels of the 1996 Peace Accords, Guatemala’s Law of National Languages (2003), reinforced Spanish as the official language of Guatemala before stating the measures that would be taken by the Guatemalan government—in some cases in tandem with the Academy of Guatemalan Maya Languages—to recognize, promote and respect the languages of Maya, Garifuna and Xinca communities. While some of the minority languages in Guatemala enjoy “vigorous” language use with certain transmission and use across generations, negative language attitudes are prevalent across middle and upper classes of these countries. There remains a glass ceiling for speakers of Garifuna and other indigenous languages that makes it virtually impossible for them to ascend into positions of power in the public sphere, despite the fact that many possess high levels of education comparable to that of the middle and upper strata. At the same time, the international recognition that indigenous writers have received aims at reversing attitudes about the learnedness of indigenous communities in the country. González faces the challenge head on and with assuredness as he engages readers, including judges of literary prizes, in his wordsmithing challenges aimed at bringing forth and preserving a myriad of approximations into Guatemalan black indigeneity.

González’s poetic work has arrived at a time when grassroots indigenous movements have surged and important conventions, such as Article 13 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, have highlighted the right of cultural self-determination: “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.” The central desire to return to Livingston—turning now

to the second query that the poet faces frequently—and to carry out this work is present in every answer he has provided to answer the question. Returning to Livingston, to his homeland, is not a possibility but a fact, despite the years it might take to physically return to the homeland. As he states, “since I was fifteen and left Livingston I’ve been moving around, traveling. I have not returned to live in Livingston... I feel the need to return and discover those stories that stayed there and are being told right now”³⁶ (Ochoa 4). In the meantime, he will follow the mobile and migratory itineraries taken by ancestors and elders before him.

González will arrive home in Yorumein, St. Vincent, as he does for now through verse. As the poetic voice expresses in “ua, lagíribuduba yorumein woun” composed entirely in Garifuna next to the translation in Spanish of “no, saint vincent will return to us”³⁷, published in *The Magicians of the Dusk* (2005: 35):

it will walk over water, over the ocean
we will tug at its hand
and it will return
 i know
 we know
no no and no, to return.we will to st. vincent
we will fly over the ocean the entire ocean
on the back of that bird that
we call time

to return. we will o á
{(to) [(our) homeland] to ourselves

just as the water catches on fire
so shall our feet catch on fire³⁸

The poem subtly conjures the pillars of Garifuna culture that might pass unperceived by the casual reader, especially the Garifuna principle of the power of the supernatural—manifested in both the conviviality of the worlds of the living and the worlds of the ancestor spirits, as well as the trance of the poetic voice’s wordsmithing—and in commitments between kin and homeland in their local and transnational dimensions. Perhaps most striking is the way that the poetic voice captures the soul of

a homeland in flux, brought about not only through the rifts and tensions caused by the emerging tourist economies transforming Garifuna communities, but also through the ebbs and flows of Garifuna identities wrought from emerging discourses of black indigeneity. With these tenets in the background, the poetic voice pushes his verses through new literary channels in order to deliver work that capitalizes on rhythm and musicality integrated into the form of the composition itself. He thus presents the reader/listener/viewer with a new way of treating the “lyrical craft,” reclaiming aspects of poetry that had been left by the wayside right as contemporary Central American poetry began to inch closer to a more conversational, prose-like approach (Toledo 90).

González, we can affirm, navigates choppy waters and proves himself to be an effective navigator on the turbulent seas: from the drifter who left his home at the age of fifteen, to the young intellectual with a book in his back pocket who can recite Rubén Darío and Nicanor Parra, to the techie who keeps a Twitter and Facebook account, to the organic intellectual poet “free styling” his verses on an internet platform before a virtual audience. Eloquent on the page and on the stage, graceful in his moves across epistemological boundaries, González knows the codes of the complex analog and virtual worlds he must cross. He is indeed, like other indigenous poets of his generation, one whose work is epistemologically rooted in the indigenous homeland of peoples who have voyaged the seas and *will* arrive home, back in Yoruméin.

Garifuna Wordsmithing Magic

There is no space in the Americas without an indigenous heritage. From the northernmost to the southernmost point of this hemisphere, the gnosis of the first peoples of these lands turned territories turned nation-states has persisted throughout the cultural, political, economic and ideological transitions their homelands have experienced. The coloniality of power, as Quijano (1992, 2000, 2014) has amply discussed, is founded on a racial axis established from the beginning of the colonial period and perpetuated through Eurocentric practices and institutions in place ever since. That indigenous writers have obtained increasing visibility since the 1990s is indeed a testament, as del Valle Escalante notes, to the rigorous critiques of nation-states and the very same coloniality of power that has led to the marginalization of the first peoples of the Americas (5). Powerful in itself is the emergence of these texts; more powerful yet—and what makes this literary moment a superb challenge to the coloniality of power—is the linguistic basis of that challenge.

Admission, so to speak, into the world of Latin American letters has long demanded the skillful deployment of European tongues. The indigenous experience, as González’s poetic oeuvre makes

clear, cannot be expressed in a single language or even a single variety of Spanish. For this poet, commitment is due to not only his ancestors and his craft, but also to his and his Livingston community's ethno-linguistic experience in one of the most peripheral sites of the Guatemalan nation. Availing himself of the discourses of language rights and the global attention to the cultural patrimony of indigenous communities, as well as the grassroots linguistic and cultural revitalization efforts headed by the transnational Garifuna nation itself, González's texts present a formidable challenge to the monolingual lettered cities of Central America. It is no coincidence that González's first book set his magic making at dusk, for his work conjures the power of words coming alive at twilight. For this magician, born and raised on the Atlantic shore of the Guatemalan nation, the sparks that fly as he fires precious words across the languages of his experience result in bejeweled literary masterpieces of Garifuna experience.

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Notes

¹ Original: *Los magos del crepúsculo [y blues otra vez]*. All translations herein are mine. These are not poetic translations; they are merely translations of the contents of the poem itself, without any attempt to reconfigure the poetic form, so as to inform non-Spanish readers of the contents of the poems. I have indicated, where appropriate, if a poetic translation can be found elsewhere.

² González is the author of: *Los magos del crepúsculo [y blues otra vez]* (Guatemala: Editorial Cultura, 2005; *Remembranzas del recuerdo* (San Marcos, Guatemala: edición de autor, 2008); *CaféinaMC* (segunda parte, la fiesta y sus habitantes, Guatemala: Catafixia Editorial, 2010); *CaféinaMC* (primera parte, la anunciación de la fiesta, Buenos Aires: Folia Editores, 2011); *San Juan – la esperanza* (México DF: Literal, 2013); *Miss muñecas vudu* (San José, Costa Rica: Germinal 2013); *Espuma sobre las piedras* (Guatemala: Catafixia Editorial, 2014); *Traslaciones* (Editorial Culura, 2015); and, *¡Hola gravedad!* (Berlin: Hochroth Verlag, 2016). A fuller literary biography appears in: <http://poemad.com/?p=9429>.

³ Terms matter, especially when the recognition of indigenous communities' trajectory across the Americas is at stake. "First peoples" is not a direct translation of "pueblo originario," but both ascribe a geographic and historical place to indigenous peoples prior to 1492 and mark their trajectory since then in South, Central and North America without falling into some of the limitations resulting from the use of other terms available. "Pueblo originario" is most often used by grassroots organizations in the Southern Cone—just as "First Peoples" is most often used in Canada—and in the field of Latin American Cultural Studies, but the debates over terms and meanings have generated discussions beyond the region. Though the literature in this area is vast and list below is by no means exhaustive, please see Zapata Silva's excellent edited volume, *Intelectuales indígenas piensan Latinoamérica* (2007), Nussbaumer's (2014) work on identity, land rights and autonomy, Salazar Peñaloza's (2010) discussion of Nestor García Canclini and Guillermo Bonfil Battalla's terminology, and Morales' (2000) use of the term for Guatemalan Mayan communities for further discussion.

⁴ Garifuna is part of the Arawak language family, which is a South American linguistic grouping consisting of approximately 40 living languages. See Aikhenvald (1999) and Ravindranath (2009).

⁵ See Taylor (1951), Palacio (2005) and especially González (1988) for in-depth critical discussion of the various histories and hypotheses of the time leading up to 1800.

⁶ The group has similarly been referred to as *Charaibes Noirs*, *Karaib Negroes*, *Garif*, *Morenos*, and others. See Escure (2004: 38) for discussion of this nomenclature, as well as the numerous historical texts cited therein, including Breton (1665), Young (1795), and Taylor (1951).

⁷ The British had a variety of reasons for desiring the removal of the Black Caribs. First and foremost, they wanted the fertile land of St. Vincent for their own planting needs as well as control of the island for strategic purposes. They were also suspicious of the Black Caribs' relationship with the French, and they feared the Caribs might stir a rebellion among the non-Carib British slaves also residing on the island. This was especially worrisome to the British given the timing with the French Revolution and the slave rebellion that had been in process in Haiti since 1791. See González (1988: 20) for further discussion.

⁸ Mariano Galvez, Chief of State of Guatemala while it was part of the Federal Republic of Guatemala, stated in a decree dated November 26, 1831: "And in order that the district and its principal town be a monument to legislation and freedom, as well as to honour the memory of the patriotic American legislator, whose penal system the State intends to adopt, and as a symbol of safety and protection, they shall bear the name Livingston" (Galvez qtd. in Gullick 32).

⁹ In a missive to Citizen Departmental Chief of Chiquimala—the department if Izabal had yet to be established—the General Ministry of the State of Guatemala wrote: "granting guarantees of their lives and properties to all the former residents of Livingston so that they may again establish themselves there or at the Bahía de Santo Tomás; declaring that, as a consequence of the political disturbances of 1831 and 1832, no prejudice or persecution would befall them" (Archives of the Political Chief of the Department of Chiquimala qtd. in Gullick 32).

¹⁰ Original: "de pequeño las cosas que me nombrabanbambam [adán enumera infancias]"

¹¹ Intrasentential code-switching occurs within a sentence. For example, when the poetic voice in this poem says "Belice city." This type of code-switching poses interesting challenges to arrive at a translation since "Belize City" is an equivalent, but not a true measure of what is achieved with the intrasentential code-switching.

¹² Intersentential code-switching occurs at sentence boundaries and presents a different set of challenges for the translator. One example in this poem would be: "Ajá. The star spangled banner. Do you have a girlfriend wingston? Tus primas son brujas. Tus tíos son brujos." One option for translating would be to translate all clauses to the target language, in this case English, without replicating the code-switching ("Uh huh. The Star Spangled Banner. Do you have a girlfriend, Wingston? Your (female) cousins are witches. Your (male) cousins are warlocks.") Another option would be to translate what is Spanish to English and vice-versa. Furthermore, translator must also decide then if these translations, regardless of the option selected, should be translated in the standard form of the language (as I have just done above for the purpose of

this example) or if the spirit of the code-switching is best preserved in the non-standard variety with all of the meaning conveyed in non-standard spelling and punctuation in the original.

¹³ Original: “Ellos tienen un idioma y yo tengo varios, ¡bum! ¡bum! / *Se siente mi flow por donde paso, ajá,* / yo que nací en un caribe iluminado con linternas / puedo conmovier a cualquiera / me dicen las bocinas que los tallos se siembran en los huesos quebrados de los viejos.”

¹⁴ Original: “me dicen las bocinas que los tallos se siembran en los huesos quebrados de los viejos.”

¹⁵ Original: “Escribe a la iglesia de Filadelfia: poema frente la estatua de Colón en Livingston.” The translation of the title and the fragment of this unpublished poem is mine. A different version of the poem, without the first three verses I highlight here, has been published and translated by Simmons in *Palabras: Dispatches from the Festival de la Palabra* (2013).

¹⁶ Original: “Think. I’m a rastaman, beautiful people; I’m a *Bastaman*, I’m a nothingman. La eminente tribulación del android en que mis ojos se seca / y salto loco de un imperio que no es de este mundo, *nobaynadamalomalo endartecalorcalor*, angélico y vacío.”

¹⁷ Original: “Discrepancia”

¹⁸ While the English translation conceals a strategy at play in this pair of verses, the original highlights the poetic voice’s maneuvers with two of the regionally-specific second-person singular forms at hand. There is a paucity of research on Central American Spanish in Hispanic linguistics. What little has been produced, however, has devoted much attention to the second-person singular form, as this variety provides for three (vos, tú and usted). While it might be tempting to see these as points on a continuum from informal to formal, such an approach would gloss over the complex sociolinguistic factors that condition their use. Though it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine these factors, I direct the reader to the research on *voseo* in Central American literature in Lipsky (2006) and Yanes (2014).

¹⁹ Original: “tú sos Vivaldi, Blues, boleros y Gospel / yo soy rock, tropical, jazz y black.”

²⁰ Original: “Hahari Wagübürigu [algo así como *el espíritu de nuestros padres*]”

²¹ Original: “Un catedrático ebrio se me acerca y pregunta / *¿es su madre feliz Wingston?* / y alguien responde por mí / *no tienes madre hijo / no tienes madre hijo de la gran puta* / porque abruptos recuerdos me niegan / me marcan / con los símbolos de la ignorancia / las contraseñas patológicas / de estos malabares lingüísticos / no tan garifunas como todos quisieran / Así publico mi rencor / / Como un testamento **contra todos** / / contra el fuego **sobretudo** / / contra las palabras **sobretudo** / / contra el reggaeton **sobretudo** / / con la propia catarsis / de quienes rumian en español / los cirios negros que el mar les negó

²² There are also Garifuna communities in Honduras, primarily along the coast. It is not clear what the population numbers are, however. Honduras government estimates a range of 10-40 thousand, while cultural activists suggest numbers as high as 200,000. As I have stated elsewhere, there are political reasons for this difference in estimates. However, the census problem is compounded by the large and frequent transnational movement to Belize, the United States, and elsewhere. Similarly, Garifuna numbers in the United States are unknown due to the same reasons, compounded by whether these are documented and undocumented migrants. The United States is believed to have the second largest population outside of Central America, with estimates ranging from 200-300,000.

²³ In fact, when I was in Livingston in 2012, a man approached me to ask in English about my impressions while I was sitting outside a restaurant along Calle Principal. He gestured at the sign next to the door advertising *tapado*—a traditional Garifuna dish appearing in nearly every restaurant along the main street—and said it was the only Garifuna thing left in Livingston.

²⁴ Representations of Livingston have capitalized on its English name and location to present it as a place “quite unlike anywhere else in Guatemala” (Vidgen and Schechter for Lonely Planet 2016). Tourism in Livingston, Guatemala has increased in recent years, drawing a multitude of people who arrive in the town to experience a “Caribbean hotspot” in a country known best for the highlands of Quetzaltenango, the winding roads to the expansive Lake Atitlán, the grandeur of Tikal and the colonial architectural of Antigua. Like the gamut of Caribbean destinations, the blackness of inhabitants and reggae beats heard on beaches are the images that sell the destinations to backpackers and trekkers alike.

²⁵ Original: *Miss muñecas vudú*

²⁶ The alternation between standard and non-standard capitalization is in the original text: “la desgracia de la castamarfil de los negros esclavos del mar. ver al horizonte es ver las series. ver hacia allá aceptarse encadenados. machetes y la sangre. Aparte. bocas blancas bestiales y el letargo de la historia. Yorumein. los jóvenes burócratas solo ven hacia el suelo. sólo hacia el miedo. Ahí donde no hay raíces. donde no hay nada. ahí donde está el testigo enterrando las uñas en el fuego sanitario del azul cielo caribe. ahí donde están los fantasmas que me niegan. Pero no las raíces. las raíces no.”

²⁷ Giftiti, also spelled gifti and guiffity, is an alcoholic drink made with rum and a various roots and herbs that sometimes include, chamomile, marigold stems, anise, peppercorns, cloves, bitterwood, garlic, and ginger, among others.

²⁸ Original: “los turistas quieren palmeras. once oncas. quieren negras en bikini y una voz que les diga tu plata que les diga lo que sea a cincuenta tiempo. dance hall o reggaeton. barroco o reggaeton. poesía o la animal historia del pueblo garínagu. el dios necesita un pueblo sin ombligo. uno que camine sobre las aguas hacia la miseria uno que sea el más turístico de una ciudad saqueda. *un freestyle cual esta maniática canción, ese es el ombligo, esta es la idea. . . . ellos no quieren saber que Haití es patria*

en América. me quejo. me quejo. suelo morderme en las fiestas y no bailar. me quejo. como una droga el cuerpo disperse en los cartílagos del niño que mira de lejos el exceso, paisajes ateos. ellos no son ángeles de Etiopía, quieren, un muchacho rasta que cante un mito, una estrella y un vaso de gifitti

no vudú please

no chugu please

no palo mayombe

no garinagu please

no no no. me explota el poder. el tema. glacial consejo de hombres me niego: *mama garífuna buguya. no eres hijo de madre. mama garífuna buguya.*

²⁹ Original: “Mito de otro mismo”

³⁰ Original: *Espuma sobre piedras*

³¹ Original: “quería el hoy como se quiere/un puñado de diamantes”

³² Original: Ese niño seré yo. Una imagen/ del Livingston del año 93:/ los cartuchos se derriten con/ el aliento venenoso del/ cielo; las dos calles prin/ cipales del pueblo tarta/ mudean juntas una canción/ que nadie ha querido/ recordar siquiera; una casa de naipes/ justo detrás de la sinagoga/ se derrumba sin asombro ni/ lámpara que cuide/ la exactitud ofensiva/ de la demolición. Sol de óxido/ oxígeno en llamas, oh, dos/ soles filtrados en la Historia/ de la Cultura.

³³ Original: “Para todos ellos este premio y para ir sacándonos las tonterías racistas con las que uno se enfrenta cuando tenés que pedir trabajo. Ahí te das cuenta que un garífuna³³ puede dedicarse a cualquier cosa incluso a la escritura y aunque parezca un poco absurdo tener que recalcar esto hay que hacerlo y este tipo de premios sirve para evidenciar esas situaciones. Ojalá que también pueda server para enorgullecer a los garífunas que viven fuera de Livingston y que tienen que enfrentarse con todo tipo de prejuicios.

³⁴ In this regard, the work of OFRANEH (Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña/Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras) in creating a home base for organizations laboring to represent black indigenous communities, particularly in matters relating to land struggles through juridical discourses of territoriality, is unprecedented. Please see <http://ofraneh.org/ofraneh/index.html> for details about the organization.

³⁵ Original: “*la bida es tan facil, dice una bos en off, tan facil como sorberla/ si, digo en bos en off, tan facil como sorberla/ sorberte isla mia/ claro, si, yo en of, que divertida resulta la bida cuando es tan facil/ como sorberla, sorberla, sorber infinitamente.*”

³⁶ Original: “desde los 15 años que salí de Livingston he estado viviendo en diversos lugares, viajando, moviéndome. No he vuelto a vivir en Livingston [...]. Siento la necesidad de regresar y descubrir las historias que allí quedaron y se están contando ahora mismo.”

³⁷ Original: “no, san vicente volverá a nosotros”

³⁸ Original: caminará sobre las aguas, sobre el océano/ le halaremos la mano/ y volverá/ lo sé/ lo sabemos/ no no y no, volver.emos a san vicente/ sobrevolaremos el océano todo el océano/ en la espalda de ese pájaro que/ llamamos tiempo/ volver.emos o á/ {(a) [(nuestra) patria] a nosotros/ así como se incendia el agua/ así se incendiarán nuestros pies/